Object type: Necklace
Indigenous name: Lei niho paloa
Culture/location: Hawaii
Date: 1820-60
Materials: Marine ivory, human hair, plant fibre
Dimensions: 14.96in x 3.15in
Institution and accession number: National Gallery of Australia NGA 70.182

Object type: pendant
Indigenous name: Hei tiki
Culture/Location: New Zealand
Date: Purchased 1981
Materials: Nephrite
Dimensions: 3.50in
Institution and accession number: National Gallery of Australia 81.1071 NGA

These Polynesian art objects are fascinating for exemplifying the role of Polynesian bodily ornamentation generally, besides being visually appealing and skillfully crafted. I hope to be able to compare the way they have each functioned historically within the context of a social matrix.

“Necklace,” (or “lei niho paloa) in the Gallery of Australia’s Pacific Arts collection, is made of lashed plant fibers, human hair, and finally a carved piece of whale ivory. In Hawaii, such neck (and even head) ornaments are called leis, despite their almost sole conception outside the islands as flower necklaces. Many historians surmise that other leis throughout Hawaii and Polynesia were commonly made of stones, bones, shells, and perhaps fish bones, especially early examples. Some historians also muse that the lei as corporeal ornamentation, art form, and social marking was brought by the first immigrants to Hawaii, or indeed to Polynesia altogether (Liu 2003, 52). Although flower leis are common signs today of friendship and welcome, the history of Hawaiian leis reveals a complex system of social relations based on materiality; Hawaiians made excellent use of the natural resources immediately available to them, but the rarest materials were prized nonetheless. Therefore,

necklaces featuring materials (such as whale tooth) which were extremely scarce were accorded to those of higher social rank. Moreover, in artistic production, Hawaiians also gave great consideration to artists' labors. A lei such as this which required immense time and effort in lashing so much hair and so many fibers together would have been very valuable. Moreover, the effort of making the object imbues it with mana (or power), and the hair itself, as a part of the head (the seat of mana), would have made such leis immensely powerful and valuable objects, for which they would have been worn by nobles, and especially by noble women for important ceremonial occasions (Patterson 2000, 229; Grabski 2016). Leis in Hawaii therefore prove revealing in relation to social structures, kinship patterns and the projection or performance of social identity, by solidifying and creating notions of identity through material culture.

Although these patterns are especially prevalent among Hawaiian leis, historians note similar patterns throughout all of Polynesia, including New Zealand, the country of origin of the Gallery of Australia's Pacific Collection's "Pendant" or "hei tiki." The pendant is made of nephrite, although other common materials include shell, whale bone, and in some cases fragments of human skull. This pendant (as well as the vast majority of its kind) features striking inlaid eyes, a curvilinear body and a hole at the top which indicates that it would indeed most likely have been worn on a string about the neck. However, art historical research into hei tiki figures in New Zealand has yielded mixed results, with speculations of purpose ranging from ancestor worship to depictions of "congenital deformities." (Brechtol 1967, 446-7). Some propose that the pendants are steeped in Maori mythology concerning the creation of men and women, which might dictate the pendants' largely female use, as in the use of hair leis in Hawaii (Hongi 1918, 162). The method of their creation is ambiguous as well, though one might suppose it was formed with an adze tool, and that due to the difficulties of carving the materials, pendants like these were made by highly skilled craftsmen, and likely invested with a significant amount of mana by this effort, just as leis were in Hawaii (Patterson 2000, 229-30, 231-2). In light of this consideration, however, I

subscribe to the view that hei tiki pendants were worn as remembrances of the dearly departed: if the pendants were made from bone, it may have belonged to the deceased. If made from nephrite, then the effort and skill required to make it may have been a way of showing respect for the dead, along with its inclusion in ceremonial chants, some of which, historically, formed integral parts of mourning ceremonies (Mead 1969, 378). Finally, the pendant's mana would have functioned socially in complex ways, maintaining both an "inalienable" quality of the personality and mana of the original owner, and accruing mana as it was passed down and preserved among family and close friends (Weiner 1985, 210-11; Skinner 1916, 310).

In comparison to the Hawaiian lei, it may well be that both objects stored and accrued mana in a similar fashion. However, the pendant's funerary purposes may mark subtle distinctions, as the lei was more likely used by and for the living, the hair having been collected from the living (Grabski, 2016). Although New Zealand and Hawaiian indigenous cultures were in many ways similar, it is important to remember the richness and diversity of Polynesian cultures, and the dangers of generalizing. Moreover, it is important to remember that, due to the nature of knowledge production during colonial periods in Polynesia, much scholarship on Polynesian cultures, even today, is either inaccurate, insufficient, or speculative, as even my research has been here. In fact, based on the information available to me, it would seem that the only certainty pertaining to hei tiki pendants is the extreme age of their tradition, which extends back so far that some historians have simply concluded that their origins have by now been irretrievably lost to time. In any case, however, it seems that materiality in Polynesia **–** with new, careful and conscientious scholarship **–** may prove key to revealing complex historical systems of social relations and hierarchies which have yet to be fully understood.

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