Object Type: Female Figure
Indigenous Name: Hikule'o
Culture/Location: Ha'apai Island Group, Tonga
Date: Eighteenth century
Materials: Whale ivory
Dimensions: H. 5 in.
Institution and accession number: Indiana University Art Museum, 2010.17

Object Type: Wooden image in human form, female
Indigenous Name: Ti'i
Culture/Location: Society Islands French Polynesia
Date: late 1773 to mid 1774
Materials: wood, plant
Dimensions: L. 12.4 x W. 5.5 in.
Institution and accession number: Pitt Rivers Museum, 1886.1.1424

The Tongan female figure, presented in the thumbnail picture above, is recorded to have been acquired sometime during the 18th century. It was associated with the Ha'apai Island Group in Tonga (Indiana University Art Museum 2002). This figure is one of a dozen carved in whale ivory that has survived from the 18th and 19th centuries associated with the Tongan deity Hikule'o, a deity connected with harvest and fertility. The contrasting shades in the tooth of the whale is just one of the distinctive characteristics of Polynesian art and the glossy patina as well as worn facial features suggest that it was handled a significant amount. Other general characteristics of Polynesian art include: durability, use of one primary material, emphasis of human form, small in scale with monumental qualities, reserved style, and the emphasis on surface detail and three-dimensional form. The people of Tonga often waited for whales to wash ashore before collecting the teeth, representing their relationship with nature and respect for natural resources.

Spiritual figures such as these were often found in shrines and wrapped in tapa, a cloth used to wrap precious items (D'Alleva 1998). A large head and stocky proportion were distinctive beauty characteristics often seen in these carved female figures; the head was

considered to be the seat of mana, a spiritual power derived from ancestors and rationality (D'Alleva 1998, 95).

In congruence with the Tongan ivory female figure, the Tahitian wooden female form also possesses the characteristics specific to Polynesian art. This Tahitian figure is recorded to have been collected sometime between 1773 and 1774 (The Pitt Rivers Museum 2012). In the 18th century there was Western contact with the Society Islands consequentially establishing friendly relations that resulted in trade (BBC News 2015). Nails from the incoming ships were traded for local objects, which allowed for an entirely new technology of tools to be used to carve figures; the use of metal tool changed carving practices on the islands. Following European contact, missionaries established religious restrictions in an effort to convert the indigenous people, forcing them to conform to Western practices. This effort of conformity and conversion of the islanders is thought to have been a possible reason for the scarcity of these carved figures.

These figures exemplify a body culture of Polynesia where the construct of beauty is distinct from the traditional and contemporary Western conception of beauty. The figures emphasize female curves, including a robust and stocky naked appearance. There is something to be said about the colonial fascination with nakedness and its connotation. Nakedness has been connoted as primitive and savage since the 17th century yet there is much contradiction between this view and the sculptures of ancient Greece (Levine 2008). Unclothed Grecian sculptures were seen as heroic and civilized, while unclothed Pacific Islander sculptures were seen as savage and having an absence of civilization. Along with nakedness and its association with embarrassment and deprivation, indigenous people were widely presumed to be ugly, reinforcing the western construction that ugliness was the standard signifier of savagery (Levine 2008). According to a study looking at gender-role egalitarianism and desirable traits cross culturally men preferred mates with high fertility, choosing women based on a reproductive margin (Rempala et al. 2014, 326). The stylistic aesthetic of body type for the Tongan and Tahitian figures included in this module could be accounted for by physical attractiveness where body parts, volume, and curves are accentuated and by health symbolized through the heavy body weight. It is relevant to keep in mind that these figures were created by men, which I speculate, may speak to the male artistic interpretation and perception of women.

I consider it important to resist masculinizing these female figures just because of their appearance and because of their attributed power. These figures are still the interpretation and depiction of the beautiful female figure at the time of their creation in Polynesia. The Venus of Willendorf was the first figure ever found, discovered in Austria and carved over 25,000 years

ago it depicts a stumpy and voluptuous female human body (PBS 2006). The figure was well-rounded and full-figured suggesting that conceptions of beauty were constructed in contrast to our current Western ideal.

Hikule'o, as mentioned previously, is the Tongan deity of fertility and harvest. Associated with reproduction, this female figure is automatically connected to genealogy as well as female sexuality. The female figure of Hikule'o, represented by the Tongan figure above, reinforces an often forgotten notion that women were necessary when considering genealogy in that they were the ones who bore the burden of creating children to pass on tradition, mana, and status. Through this genealogical power, women held political power within their community (Tiffany 1987). In contrast to this powerful female image is the image of the exotic island woman in popular culture that is easily recognizable (Najita 2010). We must not fall into western representations of a region rather than the native-centered approach so as not to be blinded by bias and misrepresentation. Cultural and historical context need to be taken into consideration when viewing and informing oneself of these figures. The construct of beauty to the western world may be contradictory to the construct of beauty in Tonga around the 18th century. The colonial representations of beauty often alter and influence the way we view these figures. If you take away this westernized presentation of exotic beauty you will uncover the traditional cultural presentation of the indigenous female who is surrounded by beauty, power and prestige.

Bibliography

"Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas." *Indiana University Art Museum*. 2002. Accessed February 2016. http://www.iub.edu/~iuam/online modules/wielgus/polynesia/polynesia25.html.

Ben-Tovim, David I. 1996. "Is big still beautiful in Polynesia?." *Lancet* 348, no. 9034: 1047. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCO*host* (accessed February, 2016).

D'Alleva, Anne, "The Power of Pacific Art," in *Arts of the Pacific Islands 1998*, 9-29. New York: H.N. Abrams, 1998.

D'Alleva, Anne, "Polynesia: Where Sharks Walk on Land," in *Arts of the Pacific Islands 1998*, 95-125. New York: H.N. Abrams, 1998.

Filihia, Meredith. 2001. "Men are from Maama, Women are from Pulotu: Female Status in Tongan Society". *The Journal of the Polynesian Society* 110 (4). Polynesian Society: 377–90. http://0-www.jstor.org.dewey2.library.denison.edu/stable/20707020.

"French Polynesia Profile - Overview - BBC News." *BBC News*. March 17, 2015. Accessed February 2016. http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-16492623.

Jones, David. 1995. "Beauty in Catholic Churches". *New Blackfriars* 76 (898). Wiley: 481–83. http://0-www.jstor.org.dewey2.library.denison.edu/stable/43249789.

Levine, Philippa. 2008. "States of Undress: Nakedness and the Colonial Imagination". *Victorian Studies* 50 (2). Indiana University Press: 189–219. http://0-www.jstor.org.dewey2.library.denison.edu/stable/40060320.

Najita, Susan Y. 2010. Review of *The Pacific Muse: Exotic Femininity and the Colonial Pacific*. *Journal of World History* 21 (3). University of Hawai'i Press: 531–34. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40985038.

Rempala, Daniel M., Ryan T. Tolman, Bradley M. Okdie, and Dohyun Ahn. 2014. "Gender-role egalitarianism predicts desirable traits of potential marriage partners: A cross-cultural comparison." *Asian Journal Of Social Psychology* 17, no. 4: 325-330. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCO*host* (accessed February, 2016).

Schipper, Mineke. 2000. *Research in African Literatures* 31 (4). Indiana University Press: 168–72. http://0-www.jstor.org.dewey2.library.denison.edu/stable/3821086.

Tiffany, Sharon W. 1987. "Politics and gender in Pacific Island societies: a feminist critique of the anthropology of power." *Women's Studies* 13, no. 4: 333. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCO*host* (accessed February, 2016).

"Venus of Willendorf: Exaggerated Beauty." pbs.org. June 22, 2006. Accessed February 2016. http://www.pbs.org/howartmadetheworld/episodes/human/venus/.

"Wooden Image in Human Form, Female." *The Pitt Rivers Museum*. 2012. Accessed February 24, 2016. http://objects.prm.ox.ac.uk/pages/PRMUID25758.html.