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Moai tangata

Rapa Nui, early 19th century AD

Sophora toromiro wood, plant resin

30.3 x 8 x 5.5 cm

FGA-ETH-OC-0070

Provenance

Former collection Livio Scamperle Musina (1926-2008)

Then collection Eduardo Uhart, Paris, 1980s

Then Galerie Témoin, Genève

Then collection Jean-Louis Domercq, Genève, acquired in 1998

Acquired from the last collection, 9 May 2019

Unpublished



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Moai tangata

Rapa Nui, mid-19th century AD

Sophora toromiro wood, obsidian, plant resin

21.5 x 6.7 x 6 cm

FGA-ETH-OC-0071

Provenance

Sotheby's London, 1968, lot no. 107

Then collection Carlo Monzino, Milan

Acquired at the Dorotheum, Vienna, 8 July 2019, lot no. 48

Previous publication

Charles W. MACK, *Polynesian Art at Auction 1965–1980*.

Tribal Art at Auction, I, Mack-Nasser Publishing, Northboro, 1982.



The wood that *moai* are made of: two figures from Rapa Nui

In this early year 2020, Rapa Nui is in the spotlight, with several publications and the exhibition *Île de Pâques : le nombril du monde ?* [Easter Island: navel of the world?] taking place until September at the Muséum of La Rochelle¹. This is a good opportunity to present two recent acquisitions of the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, both made of the same medium: the dense, shiny and divine wood of the *Sophora toromiro*.

Moai of tuff, moai of wood

When we speak about Easter Island, the first thing that comes to mind are the huge *moai* of volcanic stone standing on its grassy hills. More than 900 of them keep a silent watch over the territory of the "Great Rapa", the lonely island lost in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. But alongside these tuff giants, which are monumental depictions of deified ancestors, there were also small ones made of wood. Within families, these figures would play a significant and active part in the transmission of the memory of ancestors, and therefore of lineage.

Kavakava, papa, tangata

These small anthropomorphic statues, which fascinated Surrealists², are classified among three major types which, along with anthropomorphism, display a strict frontality and a complete nudity³. The most famous are the *moai kavakava*, easily identified by their prominent rib cage with protruding ribs and their knobby spine (fig. 1, from the British Museum). Their excessively extended earlobes terminate in a small ball (as shown by the portrait of an Easter Island man with extended earlobes drawn by William Hodge in 1777, fig. 2). Their contorted face, with hooked nose and protruding chin with goatee, as well as their scraggy body, are those of old men bowing down under the weight of years, as their curved profile suggests: these ancestors are a bit scary, to say the least... Since the second half of the 19th century, these *moai kavakava* were produced in series for foreigners; they were sometimes adorned with a sailor's cap or depicted giving a military salute⁴.

¹ Île de Pâques, au-delà des fantasmes, *Les Cahiers de Science & Vie*, 191, March-April 2020 ; Adeline AUMONT, « Île de Pâques : le nombril du monde ? », *Tribal Art magazine*, 95, 2020, p. 66-71 ; <https://museum.larochelle.fr/au-dela-de-la-visite/autour-des-expositions/une/ile-de-paques-le-nombril-du-monde-284>.

² Notably André Breton, who owned several wooden *moai* as well as a dance paddle.

³ Along with anthropomorphic statues, there are also hybrid *moai* representing either a birdman (*moai tangata manu*) or a lizardman (*moai tangata moko*).

⁴ For these issues, see LAVACHERY, "L'art vivant de l'île de Pâques", *pass.*; Thor HEYERDAHL, "The Heterogeneity of Small Sculptures on Easter Island before 1886", *Asian Perspectives*, 22, 1979, p. 9-31 (*William Mulloy: A Tribute*), p. 10; LAURIÈRE, *L'Odyssée pascuane*, p. 104.



Along with these, there were other, much rarer types: the *moai papa* and *moai tangata*. The first one is anthropomorphic, with wide shoulders and flat body, where the head is the only part shown in three dimensions; the *moai papa* displays feminine sexual attributes (breasts and vulva), but the face shows a small goatee on the chin (fig. 3, from the Metropolitan Museum). This figure is generally considered as a feminine deity, the Earth goddess *Papa*: along with the god of the sky, they form the primeval divine couple encountered in the whole of Polynesia⁵. As to the *moai tangata* (meaning “human figure” in rapa nui language)⁶, which is also very rare, it is the figure of a middle-aged man. It is this category of statues which is of interest to us here.

My first is an Oceanian kouros...

Indeed, the first of the two figures acquired by the FGA clearly belongs to this category (fig. 4): a young adult man with full shapes, with his arms along the body and legs slightly flexed, with parallel, slightly spread feet and standing in a kind of relaxed “attention” position, as accurately described by M. Orliac⁷. From behind, he is just as delicate (fig. 5). The top of his shaved head, disproportionately long in comparison to the rest of the body, is adorned with a human face in relief (fig. 6), with long spiky hair, unless it represents a feather headdress (as on fig. 2)⁸. His ears are small and placed high, the earlobes terminating in a disc with a concavity in the middle (probably a retractor used to distend the earlobe). A powerful but completely smooth brow bone towers above two big eyes with wide hollow pupils, still displaying traces of the plant resin which originally held in place an inlaid fragment of bird bone or obsidian. His narrow nose is very long and his sad mouth is slightly open, with teeth visible. His chin displays a small goatee. His clavicles and rounded lower abdomen are emphasized. This figure has a hole drilled through the neck, which suggests that, like all these *moai*, it could be worn as a pendant. His dark complexion probably comes from a chocolate brown tint noticed on several of them⁹.

With his juvenile look and frontal nudity offered to the beholder, this *moai tangata* might evoke a Greek *kouros*, but a *kouros* wandering in the South Seas. The delicacy and softness of his features, large eyes and exquisite proportions make it an exceptional piece, which can be compared to the *moai tangata* of the Metropolitan Museum (fig. 7). Its realism, typical of Easter Island productions

⁵ CRAIG, *Dictionary*, s. v. “Creation”; according to another interpretation, it would be *Pa`apa*, meaning “dried up figure”: EGGERTSSON, “Human Figures”, p. 113.

⁶ ORLIAC and ORLIAC, *Trésors de l'Île de Pâques*, p. 133.

⁷ ORLIAC and ORLIAC, *Trésors de l'Île de Pâques*, p. 133.

⁸ ORLIAC and ORLIAC, *Trésors de l'Île de Pâques*, p. 133.

⁹ ORLIAC and ORLIAC, *Trésors de l'Île de Pâques*, p. 133.



prior to 1862, enables to date it back to the first half of the 19th century, as confirmed by the results of a ¹⁴C dating¹⁰.

My second is a moai tangata depicting a child

Soon afterwards, another, much more intriguing figure also joined the FGA collection (fig. 8 and 9), which remains, to my knowledge, without equivalent in the Easter Island production. It is a small *moai* which I would classify as *tangata*, but with the physical features of a very young boy. On Easter Island, infants were called *puepue* until they reached six months, after which they were called *poki-tua-huri*. This is when their father would cut their hair for the first time, with an obsidian point¹¹. So this figure probably represents a *poki-tua-huri*, whose plump body still displays the shapes of early childhood. With his smooth head, chubby face, rounded mouth and round eyes inlaid with obsidian, he is standing with his right leg slightly advanced, as if he was walking. Like the first *moai*, this figure displays a hole drilled at the back of the neck so as to be hanged on a cord.

Its realist look suggests that it was also produced before 1862. Who could this be? If the *moai tangata* are usually considered as depictions of deceased loved ones, immortalized at the peak of their beauty, could this one represent a toddler who fell victim to an untimely death? This is quite speculative, as unfortunately we do not have any ethnographic evidence of this kind.

Rosewood and blood wood

But I am mainly interested in the wood they are made of. Both statues were carved in a hard, dense and homogeneous wood which was identified as *Sophora toromiro* by palaeobotanical analyses. Alongside Persian lilac, which was used by sculptors in later times¹², two main tree species of the rich primal forest which originally covered Easter Island were used to make *moai*: *Thespesia populnea*, mainly used for dishes, adze handles and harpoons¹³, and *Sophora toromiro*, an endemic bush with yellow flowers. Its most ancient pollen grains found on the island date back to 38,000 years ago¹⁴. Although it became extinct on the island in the 1950s¹⁵, it has been gradually reintroduced in its

¹⁰ Analysis carried out by the CIRAM, which isolated two possible chronological frames: either a period comprised between the late 17th century and 1730 or, with a better probability, a period ranging from 1790 to 1850.

¹¹ MÉTRAUX, *Ethnology*, p. 103.

¹² LAVACHERY, "L'art vivant de l'île de Pâques", p. 166 et p. 169.

¹³ ORLIAC, "Données nouvelles", p. 35.

¹⁴ ORLIAC and ORLIAC, *Bois sculptés*, p. 31.

¹⁵ ORLIAC, "Données nouvelles", p. 35.



original biotope¹⁶. If *Thespesia populnea* was considered as the Oceanian rosewood because of its light perfume and its colour¹⁷, Easter Island people regarded *Sophora toromiro* as a “wood of blood” because of the dark red colour it would display with age, or as a “twisted wood” because of the distorted look of its trunk¹⁸. Its diameter would not exceed 50 centimeters, which also explains the small size of the statuettes made of it.

A tree born of divine loves

Easter Islanders are Polynesians who came around 800-900 AD from the Marquesas Islands or from Mangareva in the Gambier Islands. Their mythology is therefore similar to that of other Polynesians. And like elsewhere in Polynesia, they perceived trees as living beings in close contact with gods, who could take the form of birds perched on their branches¹⁹. For Easter Islanders, the *Sophora toromiro* tree was of divine nature. In a “Creation chant” listing deities and their successive creations, it was considered as the fruit of the loves of the god Atua-Metua with the goddess Vuhi-Atua²⁰. As to the legendary arrival of the first king of Rapa Nui, Hotu Matu’a, founder and ancestor of all tribe chieftains, it mentions the *toromiro* among the goods which he had brought from his exile place, and he is said to have planted it on his arrival on the island²¹.

Its rot-resistant nature would guarantee the longevity of the objects made of its divine fibres²². It is therefore no coincidence that it was seen as the ultimate wood to produce ancestor statues, royal regalia (the scepter *ua* and the mace *paoa*, the pectoral *reimiro*...) and other prestigious objects like dance paddles or *tahonga* pendants (our fig. 10, a photograph taken by Mgr Jausen in 1886, shows these main objects).

A dying tradition

Rapa Nui was discovered on Easter Day 1722 by the Dutch explorer Jakob Roggeveen. The territory was almost empty before the arrival of the first ethnologists because since 1862, Peruvian slave traders had sent the elite of the island to work in the guano mines of the Chincha Islands, and the remaining population was decimated by smallpox. Traditional knowledge regarding ancestral cults

¹⁶ Mike MAUNDER, “Conservation of the extinct Toromiro tree: *Sophora Toromiro*”, *Curtis’s Botanical Magazine*, 14, 1997, p. 226-231.

¹⁷ ORLIAC, “Des arbres et des dieux”, p. 38.

¹⁸ ORLIAC and ORLIAC, *Bois sculptés*, p. 31.

¹⁹ ORLIAC, “Des arbres et des dieux”, p. 35.

²⁰ MÉTRAUX, *Ethnology*, p. 321 ; ORLIAC et ORLIAC, *Bois sculptés*, p. 31.

²¹ MÉTRAUX, *Ethnology*, p. 60 ; ORLIAC et ORLIAC, *Bois sculptés*, p. 31.

²² ORLIAC and ORLIAC, *Bois sculptés*, p. 31 ; EGGERTSSON, “Human Figures”, p. 119-120.



and rites was therefore all but extinct²³. From the earliest ethnographic investigations on Rapa Nui, notably by friar Eyraud, first missionary sent on Easter Island in 1864, the locals who were asked about the purpose of these statuettes were unable to give any plausible explanations²⁴. For instance, the patterns engraved on the head of the *moai*, which look like tattoos of human faces, a double-headed bird or sea creatures, remain unexplained²⁵. This is all the more embarrassing since between 1892 and 1896, Easter Islanders began rewriting their history, myths and cosmogony²⁶.

The king who carved ancestor statues and made them dance

That said, a Rapa Nui legend attributes the creation of the first wooden statuettes to a king named Tuu-ko-ihu: taking firebrands from an oven, he carved figures of scrawny ancestors, after he saw their spirit asleep, or rather their ribs, as the rest of the body had disappeared. Then, he sculpted *moai papa*, which appeared to him in a dream, and then started carving statues on demand²⁷. So, if the *moai kavakava* probably represents a particularly respectable ancestor or the celestial god, and the *moai papa* the Earth deity, the *moai tangata* would represent the deceased members of a lineage. Families would possess several of them, which they would call by the names of dead ancestors: the more one would exhibit, the more consideration one would get (fig. 11). Some ethnologists reported to have seen men wearing more than ten of these figures around their neck²⁸.

But these figures are above all very powerful: according to another version of the myth, the sculptor king was the first to make these statues dance, thus insufflating his royal *mana* into them²⁹. A concept specific to Polynesian cultures, *mana* is a supernatural power or force which can radiate from spirits, persons or objects. Gods and kings, who were of divine origin themselves, possess it naturally; but they can also transmit it into objects, like wooden *moai*, as suggested by the myth of Tuu-ko-ihu.

My whole is a powerful and efficient object charged with mana

Let us now go back to our two figures which, like many ancient *moai*, present a nice weathered patina. They were used, but with care... only their feet are smoothed. Like ethnologists could notice

²³ LAVACHERY, "L'art vivant de l'île de Pâques", p. 164.

²⁴ Frère Eugène Eyraud, "Lettre du Frère Eugène Eyraud au T. R. P. Supérieur général", *Annales de l'association de la propagation de la foi*, 38, 1866, p. 44-71; MÉTRAUX, *Ethnology*, p. 259-260.

²⁵ MÉTRAUX, *Ethnology*, p. 252-253; ORLIAC et ORLIAC, *Trésors de l'île de Pâques*, p. 107, fig. 62.

²⁶ For the issue of the "reinvention" of their history by Easter Islanders, see LAURIÈRE, *L'Odysée pascuane*, p. 106 sq.

²⁷ MÉTRAUX, *Ethnology*, p. 260-262; LUOMALA, "Moving and movable images", p. 29-32.

²⁸ LAVACHERY, "L'art vivant de l'île de Pâques", p. 169.

²⁹ MÉTRAUX, *Ethnology*, p. 262.



on site, this is due to their ritual use: well sheltered among families, these wooden *moai* were wrapped in a fine *tapa* fabric made of the beaten bark of paper mulberry, from which they were released only to be used in ceremonies, notably harvest celebrations or the offering of the first fruits, or in magical rituals to ward off sicknesses or incapacitate an enemy³⁰. On these occasions, like king Tuu-ko-ihu, one would handle, carry and cradle the figures. One could also pretend they were alive, and make them walk or dance, which would explain the wear of their feet.

This only renders them even more formidable and powerful.

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Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, June 2020

Translation Dr Pierre Meyrat

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³⁰ MÉTRAUX, *Ethnology*, p. 259; LUOMALA, "Moving and movable images", p. 38-39.



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Fig. 1

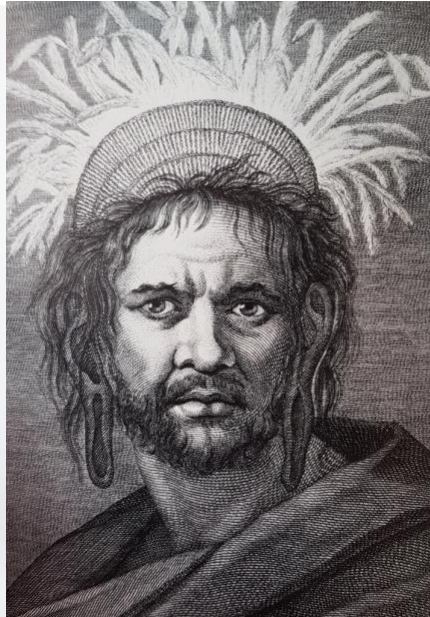


Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

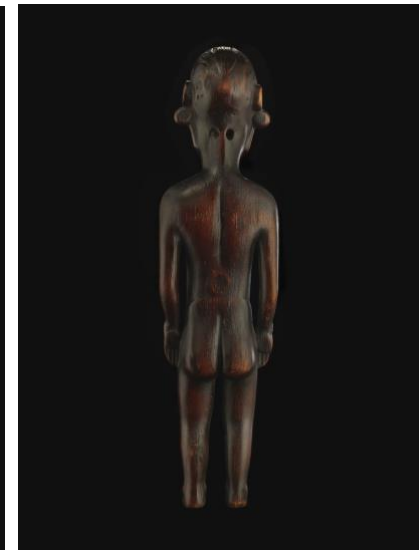


Fig. 5

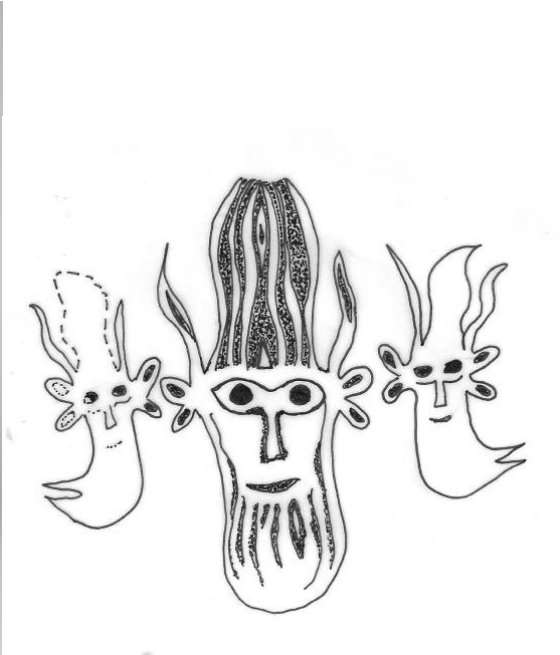


Fig. 6

Fig. 7



Fig. 8

Fig. 9

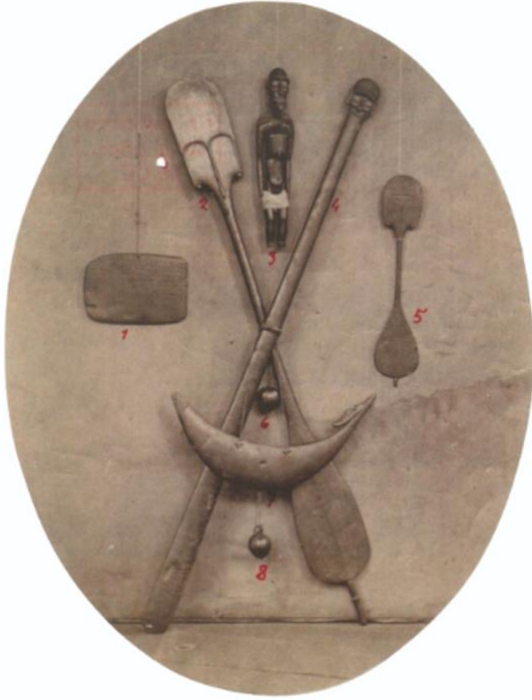


Fig. 10

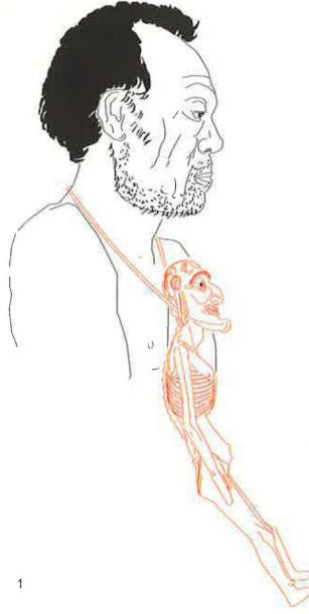


Fig. 11