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Two Unusual Wooden Figures from the Marquesas Islands

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In the collection of the Smithsonian Institution there are two unusual wooden figures from the Marquesas Islands, which have documentation that traces them to before 1858. As few portable wooden figures from the Marquesas have such early documentation, this essay will put on record the history of these two figures and place them in the corpus of Marquesan art and material culture.

History

The two figures came into the Smithsonian collection from David Dunn Thomas of College Park, Maryland, in 1967, with a detailed history. Mr. Thomas has a most interesting genealogy that takes us back to two of the earliest Europeans in the Society Islands – to William Henry (1770–1859) and his wife – of the first group of missionaries of the London Missionary Society who arrived on the missionary ship *Duff* under Captain Wilson in 1797. A descendant of William Henry married a descendant of fellow missionary John Muggridge Orsmond (1788–1856), producing Teuira Henry (1847–1915), author of *Ancient Tahiti* published by the Bishop Museum in 1928, and John William Henry (1841–d. after 1904), a great-grandfather of David Dunn Thomas.

John William Henry left Tahiti for Massachusetts before 1858 (he was baptized in Massachusetts in April 1858) and remained in the U.S. until 1875, when he went back

Figure 1. Three views of Marquesan sculpture in the Anthropology Department, Smithsonian Institution (409,700).
Photography by Donald Hurlbert.

to Tahiti with his wife Cornelia Adams Dunn and four year old daughter Eliza. In 1876 he returned again to the United States and served as a minister in Michigan until 1894. He then moved to San Francisco and again to Tahiti in 1898 and lived in Papeari until 1900. From 1900 to 1904 he and his wife worked as missionaries in Hitiaa. In 1904, because of the illness of his wife and the difficulties of life in Hitiaa, he returned to California, residing in Berkeley, where he gave parlor and church lectures on Tahiti. Henry's daughter Eliza married Jay Bonnell Thomas in 1895 – they were grandparents of David Dunn Thomas. John William Henry's collection, of which the two Marquesan wooden figures were a part, was kept in a large old box marked with Henry's Massachusetts address – an area to which he never returned after he left in 1871. The objects remained in the box until 1966, making it almost certain that they arrived with John William Henry by 1858 (based on letters in the accession file from David Dunn Thomas and on O'Reilly and Teissler 1975).

“The Henry Collection” was presented to the Smithsonian by David Dunn Thomas on September 5, 1967, in memory of his grandparents John William Henry and Henry Bonnell Thomas. The collection, which was described and evaluated by Dr. Donald Marshall, includes some 124 objects that come from various places in Polynesia, including Samoa, ‘Uvea/Futuna, the Society Islands², Tuamotu Islands, Austral Islands, and the Marquesas. The Marquesan pieces include the two wooden figures, two canoe paddles, and four ornaments of human hair.

Two Unusual Portable Wooden Figures

Each of the pair of figures is about 20 cm. high and eight cm. in diameter. The figures have a cylindrical form with low relief carving. They were described by Donald Marshall and entered into the accession records based on his description as follows:

E409.700 AH. 20.0 cm., W. 9.2 cm., T. 8.9 cm. Image carved in the round of a standing human figure, one of a pair. Top of head roughly square, eyes indicated as large circular shallow depressions, a band is indicated crossing the forehead. Nose is indicated only by carved lines. Mouth wide and straight. Forearms indicated horizontally, at sides, with six-fingered [sic] hands on breasts. Waist shown as a marked constriction, legs short and stumpy and appear slightly bent-kneed. Feet flat, formed by a notch in front of leg. Ears are each a small figure of the same type, with top of head rounded. No sex indicated but back is concave between base of head and buttocks, causing a marked steatopygy. Surface has not been smoothed and is covered with the small facets left by the carving tool.

E409.701 AH. 20.2 cm., W. 8.4 cm. T. 7.3 cm. This, with the preceeding object, form a pair. Standing human image carved in the round. Top of head rounded. Eyes indicated as large circular shallow depressions. Nose shown only by two semi-circular cuts to indicate the flare of the nostrils. Mouth indicated by two incised straight lines. Upper arms vertical, forearms horizontal, with six-fingered hands on chest. Waist indicated by a marked constriction. Legs short, stumpy and appear slightly bent. Feet flat-bottomed and poorly indicated but an effort has been made to show toes. Left foot damaged, right knee damaged and repaired with plaster. Ears are vertical, semi-circular lugs, the right one damaged and repaired with plaster. No sex indicated and this figure not as steatopygeous as the preceeding. Surface has not been smoothed and is covered with the small facets left by the carving tool.

Figure 2. Three views of Marquesan sculpture in the Anthropology Department, Smithsonian Institution (409,701).
Photography by Donald Hurlbert.

Notes on early Marquesan collections

The Marquesas archipelago consists of ten main islands and several small uninhabited islets divided into two geographic areas: A northern group – Nukuhiva, Ua Huka, Ua Pou, Eiao, and Hatutu – and a southern group – Fatu Hiva, Fatu Huku, Hiva Oa, Tahuata, Motane. The first European to visit the area was the Spaniard Alvaro de Mandana (in 1595) who named the group of islands Las Islas de Marquesas de Mendoza after the Viceroy of Peru. In 1774, the second Pacific voyage of Captain James Cook called at Tahuata, known by the Spaniards as Santa Christina, and a number of ornaments, fans, and weapons were collected by Cook, Johann Reinhold and Georg Forster, and others on the voyage. In 1797 the London Missionary Society left one missionary

at Vaitahu on Tahuata. This was William Pascoe Crook, who learned the language and stayed until 1799. Other LMS missionaries include David Darling 1834–35, John Rodgers 1834–37, George Stallworthy, 1834–41 and Robert Thomson 1838–41. However, there is no information on if they collected any objects or if so, where they might be (Carol Ivory, personal communication). Although we have little information about the LMS missionaries and their collections from the Marquesas, there is one small group of eight objects in the British Museum LMS collection. This includes a fan, two wooden bowls, a gourd vessel, a belt of bird (?) bones, a canoe prow, a staff, and a club. There is, however, no information about which missionary collected them (Jill Hasell, personal communication).

Other well-known visitors included Joseph Ingraham in 1791, Étienne Marchand in 1791, Edward Robarts in the 1790s, Capt. Adam Johann von Krusenstern and Georg Heinrich von Langsdorff in 1804, Capt. David Porter in 1813, Louis Le Breton in 1838, Dumont d'Urville in 1838, Admiral Abel Aubert Dupetit-Thouars in 1842, Herman Melville in 1842, Louis-Marie-Julien Viaud (Pierre Loti) in 1872, Robert Louis Stevenson in 1888, and Paul Gauguin in 1901 (for others see Kjellgren and Ivory, 2005). Given all these visitors, it is significant that few wooden sculptures can be identified and dated. Ivory notes only three: a figure at Colmar, France, collected by Daniel Rohr c.1842; a figure at Quai Branly collected by Noury in the 1840s; and a figure in Quai Branly said to have been collected by DuPetit-Thouars in 1837 or 1842 (Ivory, personal communication). Thus, the two Smithsonian figures collected before 1858 add significantly to the corpus of early Marquesan sculptures.

Marquesan material culture and art

The most comprehensive study of Marquesan material culture was carried out in 1897 by the German Karl von den Steinen who published a three volume work. Ethnographic fieldwork in the 1920s by Ralph Linton, E. S. C. Handy, and Willowdean Chatterson Handy made important contributions to the study of Marquesan society and material culture. Much of the early material has been summarized and reinterpreted by Carol Ivory (1990). An exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2005 summarized Marquesan art and included one wooden figure, dated only as 19th century (Kjellgren and Ivory 2005).

Important art forms are temple architecture, sculpture in wood, stone, ivory, and bone, feathered headdresses, ornaments for the ears and hair, barkcloth, wood, coconut, and gourd containers, stone food pounders, fans with carved handles, sharkskin-covered drums, shell trumpets decorated with human hair and bone toggles, carved clubs, tattoo, reciting of genealogical chants, singing, and dancing. The ceremonial complexes of monumental architecture consisted of sacred areas, *me'ae*, and secular areas, *tohua*. These open air complexes consisted of artificial stone terraces, platforms on which stood houses and other structures, and pavements with seating areas for viewing rituals and dancing. Here the ancestral gods and personifications of nature were worshiped, honored, and consulted. Wooden and stone images in human form were placed in vari-

Figure 3. Three views of cylindrical carving by Paul Gauguin “Hina with Two Attendants”, Spring 1892, Tamanu wood with painted gilt, $14 \frac{5}{8} \times 5 \frac{1}{4} \times 4 \frac{1}{4}$ inches. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Museum Purchase with Funds provided under the Smithsonian Institution Collections Acquisition Program, 1981.

Photography by Lee Stalsworth.

ous parts of the *me'ae* and a high-roofed house was used by the priest. Large stone and wooden sculptures on the *me'ae* had features carved in relief. Small stone figures were used in healing the sick and as offerings. Stone and wood sculptures usually have heavy bent legs, carved-in-relief hands placed on the stomach (sometimes the arms are separated from the torso) the head is often large in proportion to the rest of the body and often has well-carved ears, eyes, and mouth.

To return to our unusual figures in the Smithsonian, their essentially cylindrical form separates them from most portable Marquesan wooden sculptures in that they have little or no neck and do not have the characteristic waist and long legs of other later figures, for example the well-known figure that was formerly in the collection of Pablo Picasso. Instead, the Smithsonian figures are more like the large wooden temple figures, such as the ones in the Bishop Museum (see Kaeppler 1994, fig. 743). They are

also similar to some small stone sculptures, bone toggles, and carved ivory and wood fan handles, which come from the first half of the 19th century. Thus, I suggest that this cylindrical form, is an early style from at least some parts of the Marquesas. I also suggest that this cylindrical carving style, especially the type shown in Figure 1 (E409.700) may have been a model for the cylindrical carvings of Paul Gauguin (who lived in the Marquesas from September 1901 until his death in May 1903), such as the one now in the Hirshhorn Museum of the Smithsonian Institution (Figure 3, three views).

Notes

- 1 This short note in honor of Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin aims to remind our readers that although most of her publications are not about Polynesia, she did write the area essay and the entries about the Marquesan materials in the Cook/Forster collection in Göttingen (Hauser-Schäublin 1998).
- 2 The Society Islands material includes a very early accordion, about which I have published an article with photographs (Kaepler 2001).

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