

SOTHEBY'S TO SELL EXCEPTIONAL MASTERPIECE OF MAORI SCULPTURE ON NOVEMBER 22, 1998

***-- A Wooden Maori Chief Figure Is the Most Important Work of Maori Art To Be Offered at Auction --
-- The Four-Foot Standing Male Figure, Probably Carved Circa 1840, Is Estimated To Bring in Excess of \$1
Million --***

New York -- A Central Patriarchal Maori Wood Figure from a European private collection, a masterpiece of Pacific sculpture and one of the most important Maori works of art in private hands, will be offered in Sotheby's sale of African and Oceanic Art on November 22, 1998 in New York. The monumental male figure, carved circa 1840, probably in the East Coast Hawkes Bay Region of New Zealand, is approximately four feet in height. Its exceptional condition and lustrous patina indicate the age and special care given by the Maori people. The figure, which has been in the same European private collection for over twenty years, is the most significant Pacific work of art to appear at auction, and one of the most important to have survived. It is estimated to bring in excess of \$1 million. The figure will be on exhibition in Zurich, October 1-4; Paris, October 7-10; Los Angeles, October 13-17; Sydney, November 5-8; and Tokyo as well.

In an essay on this piece written on February 5, 1979, most renowned ethnographic art scholar and former Director of the British Museum and Royal Academy of Art, William Fagg stated, "A study of most of the literature on Maori art has revealed only a handful of works which stand on this elevated level of sculptural achievement, but none are so closely comparable to it and virtually all are in New Zealand Museums."

Maori figures such as the current one, referred to as Pou Tokomanawa, would have been placed at the center of a Maori meeting house facing the entrance, and incorporated into the architectural structure. Such figures represented high ranking chiefs or Tohunga, a focal point where the community found its identity. Maori chiefs served as leaders and priests in their communities, and they were identified by tattooing on the face in patterns unique to each chief. The face of this figure is finely incised with its personal tattooing, possibly traceable to a specific Maori Chief, and decorated with shell eyes, and hands artistically placed on the trunk. As Maori chiefs were also master carvers, it is theorized that this figure could possibly be a self-portrait.

The lack of decoration on the body and powerful legs indicate a carving date around 1840, predating the highly decorated carvings of the 19th century. Additionally, a number of distinctive features appear on the present figure which are not known to be repeated elsewhere, such as the unusual double-oval form of the mouth, bold ears carved over an inch in depth, impressive legs with joint marks and the detail on the toes.

The figure is representative of the high point of Maori sculpture which was later transformed by Western influence, tools and techniques resulting in an emphasis on surface decoration, rigidness and larger, flatter figures. The finely incised tattooing of the face in the current example shows an unsurpassed mastery, and contributes to the overall power of this sculpture.

Dr. Terence Barrow, former Director of the National Museum of New Zealand and Pacific art expert and the most published Maori art scholar, Ph.D. Cambridge, wrote about this piece in 1981, "This Pou Tokomanawa is of superb sculptural quality, unsurpassed by any extant carving of its type. It has a dynamic vigor of such intensity, that it is in the first rank of carving out of its time.'

This figure was brought to England from New Zealand by Dr. A.H.W. Williams between 1880 and 1890, whose relatives had long been in New Zealand. His great uncle Henry Williams (1792-1867) had been at the Paiaha Mission for many years when he was joined by A.H.W. Williams' grandfather, William Williams, in August 1826. William Williams translated the New Testament into Maori and wrote a Maori dictionary which was printed in 1844. He became the first Bishop of Waiapu in 1858. Henry was a signatory of the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840 and was greatly admired by the Maori people.

A curious addition to the piece is a waist garment of coconut or similar fiber to cover the finely delineated genital region, most likely a missionary-inspired addition to appease the 19th century ideas of decency which influenced missionary society and taught the Maori people to cease such representations. In traditional Maori belief, a such depicted penis was symbolic of power, prestige, fertility, prosperity and other such qualities.

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Additional information available upon request.