

## FIGURE

New Zealand, North Island, Maori

late 18th–19th century

Wood; h. 10¾ in. (27.3 cm.)

Gift of Henry B. Clark, Jr., 1989 (5805.1)

In the tenth and eleventh centuries, New Zealand was settled by ancestors of the Polynesian people who now compose the various Maori groups. Maori art created over the last thousand years can be divided into two broad phases. The archaic, when form was stressed over decoration, began with the settlement era and continued on North Island until about 1500 and on South Island until the nineteenth century. The classic phase—noted for its strong curvilinear surface decoration—began about 1500 and existed until recent times.

Maori carvers sculpted in whalebone, ivory, and jade but are best known for their works in wood. Not only were small utilitarian and ceremonial objects carved of wood but major constructions were decorated with elaborate wooden images. The three most important sculptural vehicles were the canoe (*waka*), the meeting house (*whare whakairo*), and the storehouse (*pataka*). Storehouses protected food and valuables while adding to the prestige of the chiefs, and ranged in size from small, boxlike structures elevated on posts to large buildings. Their facades were sometimes fitted with sculpture, often including carved anthropomorphic finials (*tekoteko*). This piece is most likely a finial figure from the apex of the bargeboards (*maihi*, or facing boards on the gable) of a small storehouse. The bottom of the piece shows signs that it was broken away, and the figure may have stood upon another figure or a mask, a common configuration.

This piece is an excellent example of an ancestor figure of the classic style associated with the east coast of North Island and may have been created in northern Auckland. The figure displays characteristics common to Maori figurative sculpture: oversized head, round hypnotic eyes, out-thrust tongue, three-finger hands, indication of sex, and bent-knee stance. Two birdlike profile figures (*manaia*)



are carved on the back of the head at the top. A large *manaia* head runs down the back of the head and abuts a separate piece of wood attached to the figure. Lashed on with split *kiekie* vine (*Freycinetia banksii*), the unusual addition supports the figure, although its initial purpose is unknown.

In the Maori view, land, human beings, and natural and man-made objects, indeed most things, were imbued with a power called *mana*. Religious objects were by their very nature filled with *mana* and protected by strict laws (*tapu*). This figure and others like it were not considered inanimate art objects but were sanctified ancestral images charged with immanent power. As such they were seen as intermediaries between the visible and invisible worlds.

RAD

## MAORI JADE CARVING

The HAA collection of Maori jade carvings include a large hand club, various ear ornaments, leg rings for captive parrots and small ancestral pendants called hei-tiki. (Hei means pendant, tiki, a human figure.) Hei-tiki exist in large numbers and in a variety of sizes, averaging in height 3 or 4 inches. These were traditionally worn by both sexes and were ancestral mementos which were passed from generation to generation. They acquired personal names and prestige (mana) from the fact that they were worn on the body of nobles. The hei tiki were also said to represent the moon goddess, associated with fertility. (The form coincidentally resembles an embryo.)

The forms which these pendants, as well as other objects, assume is dictated by the material itself. The intractable nature of nephrite which is harder than steel, yet brittle enough to fracture when dropped on a hard surface, resulted in very compact forms. For instance, the characteristic tilting of the head toward the right shoulder was due to the great difficulty in removing waste material to form the neck of an erect head. Thus, the rarest of all hei tiki are those with an upright head.

Jade sources were located on the South Island. Northern tribes traded garments or other products for it and occasionally foraging war parties went south to get it for themselves. Villages on the eastern coasts of the South Island became famous craft centers of jade-working.

The material is known to the Maori as pounamu or "greenstone." There are however, a variety of colors, each of which has its own descriptive name. The most common was the kahurangi, which is a light to medium green with mottled spots; kawakawa is a dark, even green and inanga refers to the whitish opaque variety. Like the Chinese, the Maori regarded jade as a super-precious substance possessing magical powers.

INSTRUCTIONAL AIDS: -Discuss what an heirloom is.  
-Speculate on how the pendants were worn.