

MALE ANCESTOR FIGURE

Papua New Guinean, Lower Sepik, 19th century

Wood, shell, sennit, raffia, and human hair

h. 23 $\frac{5}{8}$ in. (60 cm.)

Purchase, Academy Volunteers Fund, 1983 (5105.1)

New Guinea, the second-largest island in the world, is home to more than seven hundred culturally distinct groups. The Sepik River, which meanders for over seven hundred miles, is a unifying element for many of the northern groups. The people living along or near the river have created some of the most extraordinary art in all of Oceania. Ornately decorated utilitarian objects, musical instruments such as flutes and drums, elaborate wooden masks with appended materials, and freestanding ancestor figures—ranging in size from a few inches high to over six feet—are some of the best-known objects from the Sepik region. Ancestor worship is a dominant force, and many works of art are used in complex religious rituals.

The Academy's male ancestor figure, probably from the Lower Sepik, is carved in a strong frontal pose. The slight tilt of the torso to the figure's left relieves somewhat the rigidity inherent in such a presentation. The "stooped shoulder" impression the piece gives is aided by the large ovoid head resting directly on the upper chest. A conical headpiece is composed of sennit, raffia, and human hair. Although the adz marks are apparent and certain parts, such as the blocklike feet and hands, are summarily rendered, the piece is extremely descriptive, with many anatomical details clearly articulated. The ankles, kneecaps, phallus, and elbows are accurately, even sensitively, carved. The flange encircling the face would have appeared as a lifelike beard when sennit or other fiber was threaded through the drill holes. Tiny shells inlaid in the huge orbits give vivacity to the eyes. The frontal suture divides the prominent forehead and meets the narrow ridge of the nose. The tip of the nose has been distended because of the pierced nasal septum, and there are two holes over each nostril, probably meant for ornaments. The concern for naturalism can be seen on the outer arms,



where long segmented scars are carved in relief. Scarification patterns on images probably derive from practices common during certain initiation rites, in which the body is repeatedly incised and the wounds rubbed with oil to produce large raised scars.

Ancestor figures are associated with exclusively male spirit houses. Ritual objects such as figures and masks are stored in spirit houses where initiation, funeral, and head-hunting ceremonies begin and end. The presence of such sacred objects in the spirit house is believed to aid adult males in their communion with the powerful spirit world.

RAD