

The Loss of Sacredness in Woodcarving

Paula Rossetti Arredondo, Rapa Nui

With the arrival of the first westerners to Easter Island, an interesting situation arose: the inhabitants, accustomed to the barter system, wanted to acquire trade items because they were attractive, not because of actual need. It was a trade guided by avarice and not by necessity. That is to say, it was a type of barter that was outside the parameters of regular interchange that was known and carried out in the daily life of the island. Perhaps their new situation had disconcerted them to such an extent that, with the goal of acquiring such diverse objects as hats, cloth, metals and knives from the Europeans, they began to trade even ancestral wooden carved figures.

The acquisition of a European object appeared to have been more important than the value of the item traded. To obtain a European object bestowed a new status, not only for its novelty, but also because with it, a person demonstrated a special ability, that of having achieved an exchange. In this way, one became imbued with a special power.

Forster, who came to Rapa Nui with the Cook expedition in 1774, wrote: "The desire to possess a certain piece of cloth led them to sell various items with which they would not have parted under different circumstances, among which, hats, necklaces, earrings, and small wooden human figures" (Forster, in Puelma 1978:28).

Métraux explains this situation: "Like many other sacred objects in Polynesia, wood statues did not participate actively in ritual life unless the gods or the spirits were establishing their residence. They lost their sacredness later, at the conclusion of the ceremonies, or when certain circumstances deprived them of their mystic aura" (Métraux 1950:99). This might not have been the case on Easter Island, for many of the figures carved in wood, such as the *kavakava* figures, remained carefully wrapped in tapa cloth and were taken out only for a festivity or religious ceremony (Figure 1).

It is possible that the explanation given by Métraux is correct, but it is also important to be aware that when the first Europeans arrived (Roggeveen in 1722 and Cook in 1774), the islanders were going through hard times, called by many a period of "decline". Englert (1948:128) places the beginning of this period at the latter part of the 17th century, with a series of internal struggles, seemingly motivated by intertribal rivalries. It is certain that by AD 1680, the cultural

order that had been maintained for centuries faltered. The exponential growth of the population, in addition to the increasing demand for food, provoked a profound deterioration of the environment. It is estimated that the total population of the island could have easily reached 15,000 at its peak. Under such conditions, the control of productive lands led to ever-increasing tensions. The intertribal wars dramatically characterized this period: "The crisis was so profound that the entire power structure, the social and political order, its ideological justification, as well as the economic system that supported it and the rituals that expressed it, changed radically" (Ramírez 1988:74).

Survival of the society required that there be adaptations in all aspects of the system. Economically, the system of redistribution of food was abandoned in favor of a system based on reciprocity and exchange: bartering emerged. Along with this, there was an adjustment in the social structure, with warriors or *matatoa* rising to power. Meanwhile, the cult of the ancestors and the power of the priests associated with ceremonies surrounding the *ahu* were replaced by the birdman cult, shifting the political-religious center to the ceremonial village of 'Orongo.

This situation can help us understand the behavior of the islanders at the time the Europeans arrived. They were accustomed to the bartering system, shaped by the scarcity of products, and practically disconnected from a religion that incorporated in its rites diverse carvings in wood.

Along with this, it is important to consider the influence that the Catholic Church was wielding by the 19th century through its missionaries who, by imparting their faith, worked to erase all vestiges of a religion they considered pagan. In this way, the forsaking of objects that were once sacred could have been encouraged. There exists a reference to that effect, a letter written by the missionary Gaspar Zuhmbohm, on 4 October 1868, in which he tells of an interesting situation:

...Torometi, Kutano, does not leave anything to be desired; he is for order, works and plants, no longer disturbs anyone, and has not even beaten his wife since he has been a Christian. She is very happy. However, a few days ago, our Mangarevan, the police chief, runs into Kutano who has some symbols of paganism. He reprimands him for this, saying that he



Figure 1. A standing male figure, *Moai Tangata* (by Rapanui artist Bene Aukara Tuki) resembles similar figures collected in early times by visitors to the island, and now to be seen in museums in London, St Petersburg, and Edinburgh.

doubted his Christian sentiments. "Here," says Torometi taking off his feathers, "I just put them on one last time, only to amuse myself a little, and then to give them to you. Take them and do with them as you please." The Mangarevan takes the feathers and says: "I am not yet convinced of Kutano's sincerity." "Why not? What more do you want?" "You still have your 'ua' (authority stick). As long as you keep it, I remain doubtful of your feelings." Kutano goes into his house, and comes right back out with the stick in his hand, and gives it to the Mangarevan saying: "Don't think that this is difficult for me, for my pagan beliefs are completely destroyed." "Now I am happy with Kutano," says the police chief, taking it along. A few days later, seeing that Torometi no longer speaks of the objects once so dear to him, he sends them back to Torometi with the message that he can keep them at his house, and if some ship should come, to sell them if he can (Zuhmbohm in Coll, 1973:215) (Figure 2).

This commercialization of carvings corresponded to the last period of stylistic evolution of sculpture in wood and "...is marked by the influence of the western world," (Klein 1988:243).

With the arrival of the first Europeans, the islanders realized that they could profit from trading their carvings. Thus began a massive production of wooden figures. Because of this and the pursuit of merely commercial incentives, the new pieces never attained the quality of the ancient ones. This situation was intensified by the "poor taste of the visitors", as Métraux (Métraux 1971:80) pointed out, assigning responsibility for what happened to this art form to the first sailors. They were not interested in how beautiful the piece was, but rather in how humorous, "... which provokes the islanders, who are aware of it, to seek to make the figures extremely ridiculous, caricaturizing them and exaggerating their proportions" (ibid.).

What is certain is that the carvings postdating the arrival of the first westerners are much rougher, with many of the traditional designs much simplified or simply lost. This situation reached its peak following the disastrous incursions of the Peruvian slave traders (1862). It was during this time that nearly one thousand men were cap-

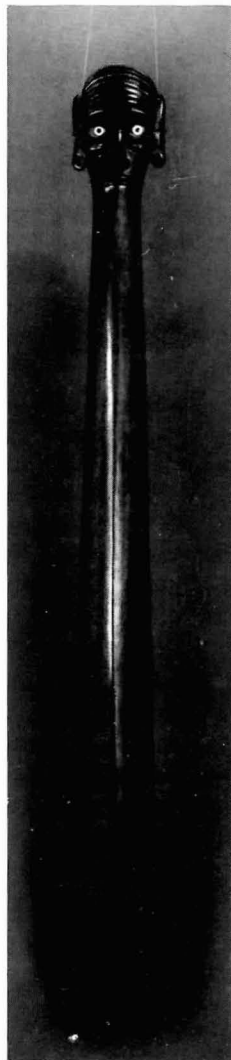


Figure 2. An example of a *Ua* or ceremonial club; these were considered as a Rapanui warrior's staff of honor. Captain Cook brought one back; it now is in England's Exeter Museum. This piece is carved by Bene Aukara Tuki.

tured and taken to work as slaves on the Peruvian coast. Among them were the *Ariki Henua* (king of the land), his son, and the majority of the *maori*, or wise men, experts in the different arts and occupations, men knowledgeable about traditions and religious rites. At the request of the government of France and Great Britain, the Peruvian government repatriated the hundred who had survived, of whom only fifteen managed to return alive to the island. The rest died in transit stricken with smallpox, which they brought with them to the island leading to an epidemic of fatal consequences. The estimated population at that time of four thousand decreased to only 111, as was noted in 1877 by A. Pinart, a passenger on the French ship, *Seignelay* (Klein 1988:243).

Faced with this disastrous situation, it is difficult to think of transmitting traditions. The art of carving wood, a well-known art among *maori*, or experts, was lost along with them. Some of the designs and techniques remained in the collective memory; that is how the inhabitants of Rapa Nui tried to reproduce carvings from the past.

Presently it is common to find that one of the main sources of inspiration for many of the wood carvers are the illustrated publications on Rapa Nui art, usually compilations of photos of ancient pieces obtained by the first sailors, and now belonging to important private collections or principal museums of the world (Figure 3).

An interesting situation occurred in 1955-56 with the arrival of the Norwegian archeological expedition led by Thor Heyerdahl and accompanied by a group of experts. Part of Heyerdahl's work consisted of exploring caves, considered sacred among the Rapanui, searching for evidence that might corroborate his theory that the culture of Easter Island and especially the plastic arts were decisively influenced by the ancient South American civilizations, particularly those of Tiawanaku, Moche and Chimú. Thus, Heyerdahl came upon numerous carvings, some of which, according to hearsay, were carved at the time of the expedition and placed in the caves or offered for sale directly to the expedition members.

These types of figures con-



Figure 3. *Moai Vi'e*, by Bene Aukara Tuki. The earliest example of this type of female figure was collected by Italian navigators and is now in the Congregazione dei SS Cuori in Rome. The pose of the figure was intended to display an elongated clitoris, so desirable on some of the islands of Polynesia. However, Ramon Campbell thought it was a birthing scene (Seaver Kurze 1997).

sisted of imitations of conventional designs, with some details changed, as well as completely new models. These falsifications do not lack value, for they reveal an innate ability to adapt to given circumstances without losing sight of the traditional carving techniques.

Otto Klein describes the difference between the ancient and the modern carvings very well: "An essential difference between the ideo-plastic manifestations of the past and those of recent times: while the former were generated on a religious basis, the latter resulted from individual efforts of some proficient sculptors who took advantage of a unique opportunity" (Klein 1988:246).

Without a doubt, woodcarving was affected by contact with the west. The loss of sacredness could well have occurred before the arrival of the first missionaries; however, the strong influence of the Catholic Church is clear. It became the nexus, or the intermediary between humans and the higher forces. This is how many carvings became detached from their original meaning, from their symbolism; desecrated and out of context, they survived in form only. However, with time they acquired a new meaning and, finally, even new designs emerged.

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Moai Sightings

The Eyes of the Moai or A Perfect Night Out in Manhattan

Peter Gravild Korning, Denmark

SINCE LAST MAY, NEW YORK CITY counts yet another celebrity among its citizens: a new-born *moai* with sparkling new eyes. It greets visitors to the American Museum of Natural History from its place in the basement just to the left of the entrance. It is tangible proof of the success of the "Legacies of a People, Masters of Stone" project that took place May 3-16 at various locations at the museum. The project included a number

of public lectures by distinguished researchers on Easter Island archaeology, history, ecology and preservation, as well as workshops on Rapanui art. Robert Hemm and Marcelo Mendez showed an excellent documentary, an aerial survey of Easter Island, with some stunning footage.

Twenty Rapanui islanders and their unique skills were the main attraction. They were flown in for the occasion, together with a huge lump of volcanic rock from the island. The Rapanui included four stone carvers and sixteen members of the Riu Hoko Rapa Nui dance troupe. The four carvers, well-known artisans of the island, Pedro Pakarati Araki, Pablo Hereveri Teao, Benedicto Tuki Pate and Esteban Pakarati, spent twelve days transforming the rock into a 1999 *moai*. The stone was not the traditional volcanic tuff from Rano Raraku, but a lump of the more malleable red scoria from Maunga Orito, a type of stone originally used primarily for *pukao*. It was collected from Maunga Orito, a quarry south of Puna Pau. The carvers, enclosed in a Plexiglas 'cage' to protect the audience from flying rock fragments, daily until the *moai* was lying, ready and waiting. The Riu Hoko made regular appearances during the carving and performed Polynesian dances in front of the cage. When not performing, they managed workshops about Easter Island music, dance, and traditional body painting. After the statue had been erected and the finishing touches added, the carvers added two eyes made of coral.

A MEMORABLE NIGHT

My wife and I paid several visits to the slowly evolving *moai* during the third week of May (always thankful of the museum's pay-what-you-like policy). On Friday the 14th we had the pleasure of watching the transformation of the *moai* from a stony enigma to an alert guardian and watchman: with much Pomp and Circumstance, the eyes were placed in their sockets in a (possible) reconstruction of history.

The evening started at the Linder Theater with a lecture, "Archaeology and Ecology of Easter Island" by distinguished archaeologist Sergio Rapu, discoverer of the one authentic *moai* eye in existence, and former governor of the island. Rapu made the discovery during an excavation at Ahu Nau Nau, the 'main' *ahu* at 'Anakena Beach. About fifteen fragments of coral found beneath the *ahu* were eventually pieced together for the famous 'eye', an eye socket-shaped piece of carved coral representing the almond-shaped visible part of an eye (with a red stone for a pupil) and fitting into a *moai* eye socket. The eye is now one of the main attractions of the Padre Sebastián Englert Archaeological Museum on the island where Rapu was director from 1969 to 1990. Though other coral fragments have been found on the island, none have been pieced together as another eye. Rapu made an excellent speech about the cultural and natural history of Rapa Nui from the first settlements until after the arrival of Europeans in the 18th century.

After Rapu's lecture the audience was guided to the Kaufmann Theater where the Riu Hoko Rapa Nui performed a succession of absolutely stunning dances and chants to the music of the *mae'aporo*, the *fatete* and the *toere*. Performing with their usual confidence and an energy level worthy of an Iggy Pop concert, the dancers took the New York audience by storm,