

# Reports and Commentaries

## Picasso and the Easter Island “palm”

Paul G. Bahn, Catherine Orliac, and Michel Orliac

On a recent visit to Paris, one of us (PB) visited the newly renovated Picasso Museum. One of its most famous exhibits is the simple bull’s head of 1942 which the artist made out of a bicycle handlebar (for the horns) and saddle (for the head). On display there was also a photograph taken by Brassai of the sculpture, and lying across it was a wooden arm and hand which, according to Brassai, was from Easter Island! (Figure 1).

Further investigation revealed something of the background to this photograph. According to Cowling and Golding (1994:31):

“in 1943 Picasso picked up a dressmaker’s dummy from the turn of the century, added to it a head of his own devising and two arms, one from the Easter Island (this had been a gift to him from the dealer Pierre Loëb), and another more primitive one, again

fashioned by himself: ‘The Woman in a Long Dress’ was subsequently either destroyed or dismantled, but fortunately not before a bronze cast of her had been made.” (Figure 2).

It seems that Picasso developed an interest in the art of Oceania during a visit to the Musée du Trocadéro, while his relations with Surrealists between 1920 and 1940 led him to produce three-dimensional works made out of various everyday objects (such as the bicycle / bull’s head), and eventually the “Woman in a Long Dress” of 1943.

Considerable light was shed on the subject by two of us (CO & MO), as we remembered having seen a poor photo of what is clearly the same arm and hand in the book by Macmillan Brown (1924: facing p. 142 & facing p. 164). The only information provided therein



Figure 1. Pablo Picasso: “Bull head with the arm from Easter Island” (1942). Atelier des Grands-Augustins, Paris. Musée Picasso, Paris. Photo Brassai. © Estate Brassai-RMN.

is that it had been collected by the German geologist and meteorologist Walter Knoche during his expedition of 1911 (see Knoche 1925:Abb. 34), and that it was “probably held in the dances.” Its extremity beyond the “elbow-ridge” is absent in this photograph – it must have been removed from the photograph when it was cut out for the publication (Figures 3 & 4).

Heyerdahl had noted the existence of this object, and mentioned it in his great compendium of Easter Island art: “Hands are in some cases carved as separate objects (Pls. 94, 202-3). One of these rare specimens in wood, collected by Knoche, is illustrated by Macmillan Brown (1924, facing p. 164) but the writer

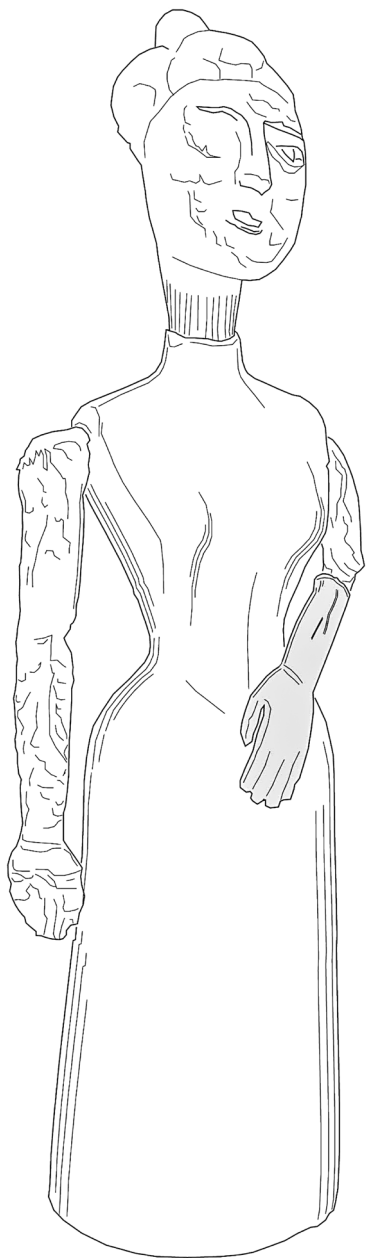


Figure 2. The cast of “The Woman in a Long Dress,” with the Easter Island arm highlighted. Drawing by M. Orliac.

has not been able to locate its present whereabouts” (Heyerdahl 1976:221). In other words, Heyerdahl was utterly unaware of the subsequent history of this object and its ownership and artistic use by Picasso.

A somewhat rare volume, however (owned by CO & MO), provided the missing link in the story, as described by Loëb himself (Loëb 1945:29-30, authors’ translation):

“One day, in the faubourg Saint-Honoré, I entered the establishment of Mettler, the youngest of our colleagues....I spotted a display case filled with fetishes from Easter Island: there were small bearded characters, with prominent cheekbones and ribs, skeletal, slightly curved, bending forwards and incredibly sad. Among them were two exceptional objects: The first was an almost life-size head; from the place where normally the ears occur, there emerged two stiff little atrophied arms. The sculptor had clearly followed the design of the stump that had been picked up or, if it is true that there are no trees on the island, from some debris of a boat found on the beach.

The second object was a forearm with its hand. Carved in a very hard wood, it ended at the articulation of the elbow with a slight ridge, carved into a crown. The hand, curved at the side, is short, with fingers with equal thick phalanges, and even the nails are depicted. One has no idea what this object may have been. Only one other of the same type is known, half destroyed, and is in the British Museum. It was probably a scepter or a sorcery fetish. This hand, a little smaller than that of a normal man, is strikingly realistic, and exceptionally sensitive, accentuated even further by lines engraved in the hollow of the palm. Like all the sculptures of Easter Island, this one gives off an impression of solitude, equaled only by that of the island itself, lost in the heart of the Pacific, and whose civilization remains a mystery. I would never have wanted to part with it, but Picasso saw it and desired it. A friend wrote me a last letter from France, in 1942. She had telephoned the great artist to give him news of me, and he had told her: ‘Do you know what I have in my hand at this very moment? The Easter Island hand that Pierre gave me.’”

Loëb’s book also presents some sketches of the hand made by Picasso (1945: pl. VII) (Figure 5).

The British Museum hand is indeed one of the most famous, beautiful and unique carvings from the island (see below); but Loëb was mistaken that it was the only other example, since a very beautiful third hand was presented by Esen-Baur (1989:252-53), housed in the Museo del Carmen de Maipú in Chile, and measuring 35 x 13cm (Figure 6). She believes

it to have probably been acquired on the island by Knoche in 1911, but provides no basis for this belief; and it is clearly different from the hand and arm in the Macmillan Brown photo – the Knoche carving is a left arm/hand, while this one is a right. She does, however, correctly differentiate the museum carving from the one given to Picasso by Loëb, and mentions the artist’s “Woman in a Long Dress.”

The hand in the British Museum, which was collected by Cook’s expedition in 1774, was studied

by two of us (CO & MO) in January 2005 (Figure 6). It is a left hand, 35cm long, and therefore life-size. It appears that its forearm was severed at some time before its collection, so it is impossible to know the original length of the piece. The carving is extremely naturalistic and the finger joints are carefully depicted, as are the nails and their concavities. There are clear longitudinal traces of abrasion on both sides. The areas between the fingers were difficult to reach, and so one can still see the wood fibers here,

Collecte Walter Knoche 1911 in Macmillan Brown 1924



ONE CORNER OF THE FINE EASTER ISLAND COLLECTION WHICH DR. WALTER KNOCHE, OF SANTIAGO (CHILE), HAS MADE. WOODEN *moaimiro* (30, 31, 32, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 44, 45, 46, 48, 49, 50, 52; 33, A FEMALE IMAGE); THESE ARE COPIES OF TUUKOIHU'S MARIONETTES, AS THEY HAVE NO RIBS SHOWING EXCEPT NO. 40; TWO OR THREE OTHERS BESIDES 33 MAY BE FEMALE IMAGES; 44 AND 49 ARE SINGULAR FOR THEIR SQUATTING ATTITUDE AND THEIR HANDS WITH SIX FINGERS SPREAD UPON THEIR BREASTS; 50 SEEMS TO HAVE THE VISOR MENTIONED BY FORSTER; 34 IS AN INSTRUMENT FOR THE DANCES; 54 IS A HAND ALSO PROBABLY HELD IN THE DANCES; 42 IS AN *ua*, OR DANCE CLUB; 41, 47, 51, AND 53 SHOW THE CRUDEFER ART WHEN DEALING WITH STONE; 55, 57, 58, 62 TO 70 ARE *tokis*; 56 IS A HATTED *toki*; 59, 60, 72 AND 73 ARE SPEAR-HEADS (*mataa*).

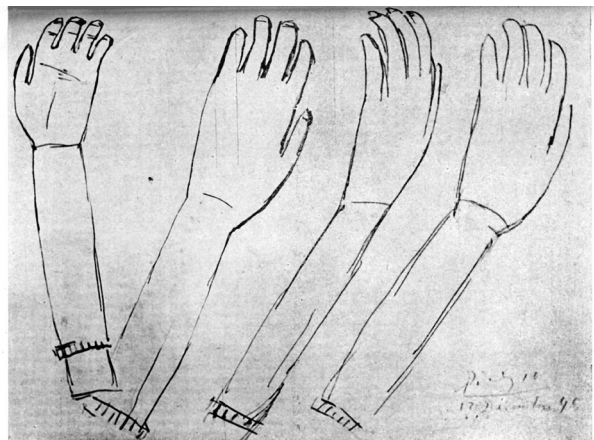
Macmillan Brown J., 1924, *The Riddle of the Pacific*, T Fisher Unwin Ltd, London Adelphi Terrace, pl. face à p. 142

Figures 3 (above) and 4 (below). The arm and hand, from Macmillan Brown (1924).



Macmillan Brown 1924 p. 162

A CARVED HAND USED IN THE DANCES



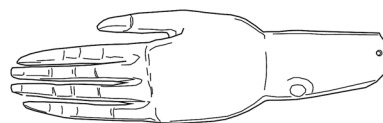
La main, incurvée sur le côté... (p. 30) Pierre Loëb, 1945, *Voyages à travers la peinture* Paris Bordas, 164-10 p. XLVIII pl. b.t. pl. VII

Figure 5. Drawing of the arm and hand by Picasso, from Loëb (1945).

left by the removal of material. The hand was never colored, but some traces of pigment are encrusted in its hollows – one can see brown, yellow and red between the fingers. The carving is quite worn over its whole surface, polished by long handling. The severed area at the wrist is also polished, but less so than the rest. It also has a cylindrical hole through it, with a different patina. The severing was done from both sides, rather clumsily, with an inefficient tool, probably a stone adze. This hand is of *toromiro* wood, with three knots visible in it; clearly carved from a branch with a fairly flat cross-section, it shows a hand whose fingers (unlike the thumb) are curved upwards, as in Polynesian or more generally Asian dances. Its gracefulness and the length of the nails suggest that it is the hand of an aristocrat.

A basic enigma which remains is the possible function(s) of these three wooden arms/hands, and any others which may have existed. One possibility is that they formed part of the great human mannequins made of straw and other organic materials that were observed on the island by González in 1770 and La Pérouse in 1786, but those were said to be more than 3m tall, whereas these hands are life-size at most...

If any readers of the RNJ have any idea whether the original wooden arm/hand from Picasso's sculpture still survives somewhere, it would be enormously interesting to know where it is, so that it could have its wood analyzed and perhaps even radiocarbon dated, although we suspect that it is a modern carving. As far as we are aware, its dimensions were never published;

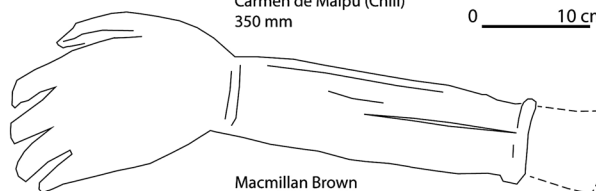


British Museum EP32  
350 mm

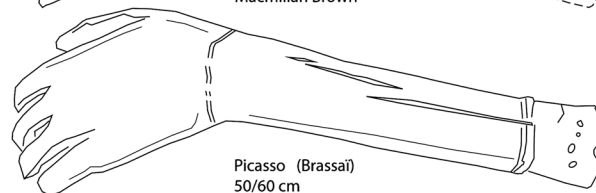


Carmen de Maipu (Chili)  
350 mm

0 10 cm



Macmillan Brown



Picasso (Brassaï)  
50/60 cm

Figure 6. The Picasso arm, the hand in the Museo del Carmen de Maipú, and the hand in the British Museum: drawing by M. Orliac.

but going by the photo of it on the bull's head (which measures 42 x 41 x 15cm) and the size of the bronze cast of the "Woman in a Long Dress" (161.3 x 54.6 x 45.7cm), one can estimate that the total length of the wooden arm/hand is about 50-60cm.

## References

- Brown, J.M. 1924. *The Riddle of the Pacific*. London: Unwin.  
 Cowling, E. & Golding, J. 1994. *Picasso: Sculptor/Painter*. London: Tate Gallery.  
 Esen-Baur, H-M. (ed.) 1989. *1500 Jahre Kultur der Osterinsel*. Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern.  
 Heyerdahl, T. 1976. *The Art of Easter Island*. London: Allen & Unwin.  
 Knoche, W. 1925. *Die Osterinsel, eine Zusammenfassung der chilenischen Osterinsel-expedition des Jahres 1911*. Concepción: Wissenschaftliches Archiv von Chili.  
 Loëb, P. 1945. *Voyages à Travers la Peinture*. Galerie Pierre, de Paris. Paris: Bordas.