

Finch & C°



81 A rare Enggano Island; Indonesia, wood sculpture in the form of a human head

Dark patina with painted eyes
19th CENTURY

Size: 17cm high x 9cm wide
Provenance: Inscribed in white script "Whitaker 802/779"

Enggano Island is situated south west of Sumatra in the Indonesian Archipelago. It is surrounded by a coral barrier reef off which many ships have been wrecked. The art of the people of Enggano is the only evidence we have today of a culture that has disappeared.

The main examples of Enggano art are in the Florence Museum of Natural History and were collected by the explorer Elio Modigliani who visited the island in 1891. As well as ethnographic material he gathered information about the customs and culture of the islanders and also studied the fauna of which he brought back specimens that had previously been unknown.

Enggano meaning 'The Island of Naked People' first appears on 16th century maps by Cornelius De Jode after a voyage by a Dutch navigator in the service of the Portuguese. In 1596 another navigator was prevented from landing on the island by the hostility of the inhabitants.

When Elio Modigliani visited in 1891 the number of inhabitants had been so reduced by disease and social change that their will to oppose outsiders had been almost entirely eroded.

The islanders lived in 'bee hive' houses that no longer exist, and the central post just under the floor of the house was decorated with a small human figure with arms outstretched to symbolically support the floor. These, Modigliani believed were war trophies, carved in imitation of slain enemies whose heads they had severed.

This wooden head has been detached from its lower part: in fact sawn off in the 19th century. There are four that were collected by Modigliani, and now in Florence, that bear great similarities to this head.

They would have served the same purpose of a potent trophy for the Enggano headhouse, as the grotesquely displayed heads of the enemy had once done.

It has been remarked that the art of Enggano bears similarities to that of Hawaii, New Zealand, and the Marquesas Islands, but so little anthropological research has been carried out in this area no one can say anything with certainty. Perhaps the islanders' art was influenced by that on the shipwrecked boats that they would raid once they had sunk.

A RARE ENGGANO ISLAND, INDONESIA, WOOD SCULPTURE IN THE FORM OF A HUMAN HEAD HEAD

A RARE ENGGANO ISLAND , INDONSIA WOOD SCULPTURE IN TH EFORM OF A HUMAN HEAD

DARK PATINA WITH PAINTED EYES

19TH CENTURY

SIZE : 17 CM HIGH X 9 CM WIDE

LITERATURE

ENGGANO ISLAND IS SITUATED SOUTH WEST OF SUMATRA IN THE INDONESIAN ARCHIPELAGO. IT IS SURROUNDED BY A CORAAL BARRIER REEF OFF WHICH MANY SHIPS HAVE BEEN WRECKED. THE ART OF THE PEOPLE OF ENGGANO IS THE ONLY EVIDENCE WE HAVE TODAY OF A CULTURE THAT HAS DISAPPEARED.

THE MAIN EXAMPLES OF ENGGANO ART ARE IN THE FLORENCE MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY AND WERE COLLECTED BY THE EXPLORER ELIO MODIGLIANI WHO VISITED THE ISLANDS IN 1891. AS WELL AS ETHNOGRAPHIC MATERIAL HE GATHERED INFORMATION ABOUT THE CUSTOMS AND CULTURE OF THE ISLANDERS AND ALSO STUDIED THE FAUNA OF WHICH HE BROUGHT BACK SPECIMENS THAT HAD PREVIOUSLY BEEN UNKNOWN.

ENGGANO MEANING 'THE ISLAND OF NAKED PEOPLE' FIRST APPEARS ON 16TH CENTURY MAPS BY CORNELIUS DE JODE AFTER A VOYAGE BY A DUTCH NAVIGATOR IN THE SERVICE OF THE PORTUGUESE. IN 1596 ANOTHER NAVGATOR WAS PREVENTED FROM LANDING ON THE ISLAND BY THE HOSTILITY OF THE INHABITANTS.

WHEN ELIO MODIGLIANI VISITED IN 1891 THE NUMBER OF INHABITANTS HAD BEEN SO REDUCED BY DISEASE AND SOCIAL CHANGE THAT THEIR WILL TO OPPOSE OUTSIDERS HAD BEEN ALMOST EBTIRELY ERODED.

THE ISLANDERS LIVED IN 'BEE HIVE' HOUSES THAT NO LONGER EXIST, AND THE CENTRAL POST JUST UNDER THE FLOOR OF THE HOUSE WAS DECORATED WITH A SMALL HUMAN FIGURE WITH ARMS OUTSTRETCHED TO SYMBOLICALLY SUPPORT THE FLOOR. THESE, MODIGLIANA BELIEVED WERE WAR TROPHIES, CARVED IN IMITATION OF SLAIN ENEMIES WHOSE HEADS THEY HAD SEVERED.

THIS WOODEN HEAD HAS BEEN DETACHED FROM ITS LOWER PART: IN FACT SAWN OFF IN THE 19TH CENTURY. THERE ARE FOUR THAT WERE COLLECTED BY MODIGLIANI, AND NOW IN FLORENCE, THAT BEAR GREAT SIMILARITIES TO THIS HEAD.

THEY WOULD HAVE SERVED THE SAME PURPOSE OF A POTENT TROPHY FOR THE ENGGANO HEADHUNTER, AS THE PROUDLY DISPLAYED HEADS OF THE ENEMY HAD ONCE DONE.

IT HAS BEEN REMARKED THAT THE ART OF ENGGANO BEARS SIMILARITIES TO THAT OF HAWAII, NEW ZEALAND, AND THE MARQUESAS ISLANDS, BUT SO LITTLE ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH HAS BEEN CARRIED CARRIED OUT IN THIS AREA NO ONE CAN SAY ANYTHING WITH CERTAINTY. PERHAPS THE ISLANDERS' ART WAS INFLUENCED BY THAT ON THE SHIPWRECKED BOATS THAT THEY WOULD RAID ONCE THEY HAD SUNK.