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RARE MELANESIAN NEW CALEDONIAN KANAK CEREMONIAL MOURNING FIGURE OF A MASKED DANCER

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FROM NORTHERN GRAND TERRE ISLAND

LATE 18TH CENTURY

SIZE: 39CM HIGH - 15¼ INS HIGH / 44CM HIGH - 17¼ INS HIGH (WITH BASE)

(RADIOCARBON TEST CERTIFICATE AVAILABLE)

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LITERATURE

THIS FINELY CARVED FIGURE REPRESENTS A MASKED DANCER THAT WOULD PERFORMED DURING THE RITUAL MOURNING CEREMONIES THAT ACCOMPANIED THE DEATH OF AN IMPORTANT CHIEF. THE DANCER EMBODIED THE SPIRIT OF THE CHIEF PROVIDING A LINK BETWEEN THE LAND OF THE LIVING AND THE REALM OF THE ANCESTORS. AFTERWARDS THE FIGURES SERVED AS SYMBOLS OF CHIEFLY AUTHORITY, AS RITUAL PROTECTORS AND PERSONAL GUARDIANS. THEY WERE OFTEN PLACED BY THE DOOR OF A HOUSE TO PROVIDE PROTECTION FOR THE INHABITANTS. A PHOTOGRAPH TAKEN IN 1911 IN THE TIOUAKAZ VALLEY ON GRAND TERRE ISLAND BY THE SWISS NATURALIST FRITZ SARASIN SHOWS THE ENTRANCE OF A HUT WITH TWO CARVED DOOR JAMBS AND A THRESHOLD. THE BASE OF THE LEFT DOOR JAMB IS BROKEN AND IN THE EMPTY CREVICE IS PLACED A SMALL FIGURE REPRESENTING THE MASK WEARER INTENDED TO REPEL THE EVIL SPIRITS WHO COULD TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE UNCONTROLLED ENTRANCE TO ENTER THE DWELLING. SARASIN DESCRIBED THESE FIGURES AS 'KNOWN GUARDIANS' IN ALL THE REGIONS OF THE ISALND.

IN CONTRAST TO MOST OTHER AREAS OF MELANESIA A SYSTEM OF HEREDITARY CHIEFMANSHIP OPERATED. MANY DIVERSE DIALECTS WERE SPOKEN, BUT THERE WAS A GENERAL CULTURAL HOMOGENEITY THROUGHOUT THE AREA. BOTH RELIGIOUS, CEREMONIAL AND SECULAR ART WAS PRODUCED WITH WOOD CARVINGS EMPHASISING FORM. AS IN THIS SCULPTURAL FIGURE, FACES WERE PORTRAYED WITH A BROAD CRESCENT SHAPED MOUTH, FLARING NOSTRILS AND BULBOUS FEATURES. THE EXTINCTION OF NEW CALEDONIAN TRADITIONAL CULTURE IN THE EARLY 19TH CENTURY WAS SO COMPLETE THAT LITTLE IS NOW KNOWN OF THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THESE EXTRAORDINARY RITUAL SCULPTURES.

PROVENANCE

EX FRENCH COLONIAL COLLECTION MADAME VIREMOUNEIX NOUMEA NEW CALEDONIA

EX COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST ROBERT TATIN BASED IN NOUMEA 1961 TO 1965 ACQUIRED FROM ABOVE IN EXCHANGE FOR SEVERAL PAINTINGS COMMISSIONED BY HER

EX COLLECTION NICOLAI MICHOUTUSHKINE ACQUIRED FROM ABOVE AND TAKEN TO VANUATU 1965-1994 THEN TO SWEDEN IN 1994

EX PRIVATE SCANDINAVIAN COLLECTION ACQUIRED FROM ABOVE 1994

EX PRIVATE ENGLISH COLLECTION

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