

Male anthropomorphic figure



- Maprik district, Wosera groupe. Second half of 19th century. Polychrome wood.
- Height: 123 cm; width: 12.5 cm; depth: 19 cm.
- Collected in 1906 by Dr. Schauinsland.
- Formerly Überseemuseum Collection, Bremen.
- Inv. 4080-1

This carving, made out of a single piece of wood, represents an anthropomorphic male figure, with a hornbill perched on his head. The figure is standing straight, shoulders pushed backwards, and naked apart from an indication in ornaments, either painted or carved. The legs are massive, straight, and the division between the thighs and the calves is strongly marked by edged knees. The feet are resting on a small platform, with the

toes indicated by way of incisions. The arms, where shell ring ornaments have been carved out, are arched backwards, with the hands resting at the junction between the thigh and the hips (compare with the other sculptures, cats. 22, 26, 27). The shoulders are delineated in relief, unifying the arms and the upper torso, and forming an almost detached “horseshoe” shape on the back. The head, with almost no neck, has painted facial ornaments and is slightly elongated. It also has a headdress in a slight relief. The perched hornbill is easily recognisable due to the specific shape of his beak and the indication of the wrinkles on the top of the bill. Ornaments, such as a shell necklace and shell armband are indicated either by way of painting or carving. One can also notice the star-like (*kun*) design on the side of the right thigh, a motif which echoes the eye of the basketry mask cat. 25.

Three-dimensional carvings representing anthropomorphic figures were common in the Maprik area. *Wapinyan*, as they are called (« sons [*nyaan*] of the long yams [*waapi*] », be they male or female) are figurations of the clan’s totemic spirit *Gwaal*. Made to be presented inside the ceremonial house to be seen by the initiates, they were not the spirits themselves, but one of their temporary material manifestations. The colourful designs, as well as the indication of face paintings and body ornaments, notably the *Tridacna* shell rings, increased the relationship between these figures and the actual dress that these initiates would

themselves wear at the end of the period of seclusion, in turn transforming them into another manifestation of these invisible procreative powers.

As often the case with material representations of spirits in Melanesia, once used during these ceremonial events, images often lost their value and could become available to Western collectors. The association of anthropomorphic figures with a bird (or two birds) on the top of its head is quite a common feature throughout the area. The representation of a hornbill on the top of the head, although seemingly referring to a possible clan's totemic bird (*jaa^mbu*), seems more general.

Hornbills (*paal*) play an important part in announcing the incoming harvest of the yams. Associated with the sun, they also were a model for the flat carved figures presented on the front of the ceremonial house.

Ludovic Coupaye, *Ombres de Nouvelle-Guinée*, Musée Barbier-Mueller & Somogy Editions d'Arts, 2006, notice p. 400.