

Jade Breast Pendant



- *hei-tiki*
- Polynesia
- New Zealand
- Maori
- 18th-19th century
- Jade (nephrite)
- H. : 10,2 cm
- Te Puawaitanga period (1500–1800).
- INV. 5107-E

Within a few hundred years of their first settlement in New Zealand, the Maori had discovered the sources of jade, *pounamu*, deep in a few mountain valleys and on the wild weather coast of the South Island. Without any pack animals and unable to use canoes on this exposed coast, the rough lumps had to be carried out on their backs, across high mountain passes and glacier-fed rivers, wearing flax sandals to protect their feet from the jagged rock and freezing snow.

This jade mineral was nephrite, extremely hard and difficult to work. Maori first tried to work it with their old techniques of flaking and grinding. But soon they developed a new method of cutting and shaping the jade with sandstone saws and abrasives, using stone-tipped cord drills for perforation. Maori craftsmen were then able to produce sharp chisels for intricate woodcarving, a sharp-edged fighting club, and a range of ear and breast pendants.

The highest expression of the jade-worker's skill was the *hei-tiki*, representing a contorted human figure. Two basic forms developed one rarer composition of a twisted body with one hand to the mouth or chest, and the more frequent frontal form with both hands on the hips, as on the Barbier- Mueller example.

Hei-tiki were traded widely through the length of New Zealand, to tribes eager to obtain this most highly valued gemstone. With its own personal name, a *hei-tiki* became a family heirloom, gaining in fame as it passed down the generations, taking on the mana of the illustrious ancestors, both male and female, who had worn it close to their body.

The Barbier-Mueller *hei-tiki* is so ancient that the facial features have been worn smooth and the flax suspension cord has twice worn right through its hole. As an ancient pre-European *hei-tiki*, this one tends to be smaller and finely detailed, with a deep rich polish. Later post-European *hei-tiki* are usually much larger and have coarse features, often with a high-gloss shallow polish.

Roger Neich, *Arts of Africa and Oceania. Highlights from the Musée Barbier-Mueller, musée Barbier-Mueller & Hazan (eds.), 2007: p. 373.*