



Deity Figure (Zemí)

Date

1100-1500 CE

Primary Maker

Taíno

Medium

Wood

Description

This sculpture was made by the Taíno people living in the Dominican Republic between 1100-1500 CE. Like most other pre-Columbian cultures, the Taíno people were animistic, believing that all objects housed vital forces that could be communed with by shamans or caciques (village chieftains). The skeletal expressions of the Taíno's zemí figures were depictions of several supernatural forces including deities and ancestors. If properly presented with offerings they could be used to consult the natural geometries which connected humans to both the

celestial sphere and the underworld and see looming disasters or even heal the sick. Zemí were most often used at regular cohoba ceremonies by shamans or caciques who would fast for several days and then inhale a psychoactive mixture to go into a trance state. This figure may be Maquetaurie Guayaba, the lord of the realm of the dead, or Baibrama, the giver of cassava and a symbol of growth. Wooden objects, even those carved from dense woods, tend to fare poorly being exposed to the tropical elements in the Caribbean for prolonged periods. Most of the wooden objects that survived the Spanish colonization of the islands were found in caves, preserved by their arid environment. During the proselytization of the islands records tell of large quantities of pagan icons being destroyed, and many scholars believe that the Taíno hid these ritual objects in caves to save them from being destroyed. Dating as far back as the second century BCE, migrations of forerunners to the Taíno brought knowledge of pottery making to the Caribbean. Additional waves of migration served to further change the way that pottery was made until around 1000 CE, after which point the various cultures and groups are referred to by the umbrella term Taíno. The various subgroups that constituted the Taíno created a wealth of different pottery styles, though their earthenware can be characterized by commonly featuring abstracted anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures with much of the supplemental decoration done as high-relief geometric linework.

Dimensions

13 3/8 × 5 3/4 × 4 1/4 in. (34 × 14.6 × 10.8 cm)