



Cave Figure (Aripa)

Date
1600-1800

Primary Maker
Ewa

Medium
Ironwood

Description
These now fragile, one-legged figures rested in caves for hundreds of years until their discovery in the 1960s. A major discovery, cave figures are some of the oldest Pacific Island art yet found. Stored in a special place in the men's ceremonial house, they were activated through incantations and magical substances to serve as hunting spirits. The Karawari River is one of the major tributaries that leads into Papua New Guinea's rambling Sepik River. The larger area is an expansive basin of branching waterways whose unnavigable terrain created the most

linguistically diverse region of the most linguistically diverse island on the planet. Several cultures live along the Karawari and nearby rivers, in the adjacent lowlands, and the slopes of the nearby mountains. Along the Karawari's upper reaches are as many as 300 caves and significant rock outcroppings, each of which has at least some evidence of human habitation, one of which are several types of wooden carvings. The oldest Karawari cave figures are approximately 400 to 200 years old and may be some of earliest existing wood carvings from Melanesia. They tell an important story about the Ewa culture who created them. These figures represent Aripa, who served as a connection between Ewa men and spirits who helped them with hunting. Other figures represent legendary female ancestors who founded the Ewa's village clans. These figures generally lived in spirit houses where they were activated through incantations and magical practices. When the owner of a figure died, the carving was moved to the caves where it served as a memorial. This practice shielded the cave figures from harsh environmental factors, offered protection for the memorial, and preserved the craftsmanship and ceremonial tradition of the Ewa people for future generations.

Dimensions
24 x 2 1/4 x 6 3/8 in. (61 x 5.7 x 16.2 cm)