



Ancestor Figure (Korwar)

Date

19th Century

Medium

Wood

Description

This korwar figure carved in bold angular lines is associated with ancestral worship and is believed to provide a residence for the soul of respected ancestors. In addition it allows members of a deceased person's family to "communicate" with the deceased as it functions as a medium of communication between the living and the dead. The Korwar is a unique artistic motif that is identified with the people and cultures of Cenderawasih Bay. Also known as ancestor figures, Korwar figures are identified by their distinctive anchor-like noses and elegant open work carvings. Korwar figures are also noted for their unique abstraction of human form. The eyes of

the Korwar are frequently embedded with blue glass beads. Popular design motifs include shields and snakes that serve as symbols of death and resurrection. The carving of a Korwar figure and its unique motifs involve a complex process which requires both spiritual and technical mastery. Thus, the clan religious expert who would carve the Korwar figure was also usually a master carver. Korwar figures were created selectively. Because the figures housed one's spirit, having a Korwar created for one was an honor. Those considered for the honor were usually individuals who performed a leadership function in life, such as a family head, clan head, or leader of an expedition. Others chosen were those who had died of a sudden or premature death. These people received a Korwar for their spirit due to the belief that they might haunt their family if they were too quickly forgotten. The Korwar image played an active part in both the spiritual and visual expressions of daily life. Korwar figures like this one were typically placed in the family home. The Korwar functioned as an active presence in both the family and community. A Korwar figure was consulted for significant life events such as births, marriages, and deaths. They were thought to be able to heal the sick and ensure fertility in women. Korwar figures were also summoned for important communal ventures such as sea-faring journeys. In this case, the Korwar was petitioned for favorable winds and no rain. In addition, on head-hunting expeditions, the warriors would wear male Korwar amulets into battle. These amulets were thought to provide protection by blinding the enemy and rendering its own

people invisible. Korwar figures were also feared by outsiders since it was believed that they could make someone ill or even kill them. Despite the esteemed place Korwar figures held in society, if a figure failed to perform its duties or its advice proved false, the owner would in some cases destroy it.

Dimensions

6 1/2 in. (16.5 cm)