



## Axe Haft Currency

### Date

mid 20th century

### Primary Maker

Massim

### Medium

Wood and fiber

### Description

This ceremonial haft is found within the Massim region in eastern Papua New Guinea. It is the blade, unfortunately missing, that is the most valuable part of the axe. Interestingly, the axe haft and blade are sourced to different areas. The blade, also referred to as beku, is made from green basalt which was mined in a quarry near Suloga on Woodlark Island until the 1870s. The purpose of such axe hafts is not a functional one. Rather, together with stone blades, these axes are a prestige item and a form of currency within the Massim area. When used as exchange items, a wooden haft would be carved for the presentation, but was often later discarded. The overall purpose of the haft of the axe is to display and set off the striking qualities of the blade, which is where the axe's value lies. An axe of this quality would be a display of wealth only afforded to a village's most prominent members—some were heirlooms to never be traded. Their ceremonial usage is involved in being carried by women

in dances at harvest celebrations. The shape of the ceremonial axes represents both the physical form, and symbolically the vitality, of the human arm. Birds are common symbols on these axes, and we see two as part of the ornamental carvings at the top of the haft. There are currently mixed reports about whether or not these axes are still actively being used as currency. Regardless, it is clear that presentation axes continue to hold an esteemed place in Massim society.

### Dimensions

32 × 13 × 1 in. (81.3 × 33 × 2.5 cm)