

Basic Detail Report



Marsupial Figure

Date

1500 BCE - 1600 CE

Medium

Stone

Description

Little is known about these prehistoric lithics from the Papuan Highlands which have been tested to be up to

3500 years old, the oldest known sculptural artifacts from Oceania. As is the case with this stone figure, these objects are almost always zoomorphic, representing endemic Papuan mammals and birds. The wear this stone has received make it difficult to determine beyond a doubt, but this figure represents some marsupial, almost certainly a cuscus. Lithics from the Papuan Highlands generally fall into one of a few categories: mortars, pestles or these sculptural pieces. Unlike the other two object types, the function of these pieces is speculative, most likely used for either totem or ancestor worship, in rituals, or as a hunting charm. Stone objects date back to the earliest inhabitants of Melanesia, growing in specialization over time with the evolution of practices like agriculture and hunting. Mortars, pestles, and ceremonial objects that might be hundreds or thousands of years old are rediscovered with some frequency, especially during construction or from tilling soil, and are used or instilled with a newfound spiritual significance. Utilitarian stone tools tend to be undecorated, but pieces created for ceremonial purposes are highly refined—painstakingly pecked and ground to create figurative or abstract geometric forms.

Dimensions

3 1/2 × 3 1/2 × 7 1/2 in. (8.9 × 8.9 × 19.1 cm) In stand: 5 1/2 × 3 1/2 × 8 in. (14 × 8.9 × 20.3 cm)