Emmett & White
ANTIQUES & INTERIORS

Early 20th-Century Kwoma Minja Yam-Ceremony Figure

£195

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REF: 5068

Height: 40 cm (15.7")

Width: 15 cm (5.9")

Depth: 4 cm (1.6")

Description

An evocative early 20th-century carved wooden Minja ceremonial figure from the Washkuk Hills region of the Upper Sepik River, Papua New Guinea. Attributed to the Kwoma people, or possibly their closely related Nukuma neighbours, this compelling sculpture belongs to one of the region's most distinctive artistic and ceremonial traditions.

Minja figures formed part of the annual cycle of yam-harvest ceremonies practised by the Kwoma, Nukuma, and neighbouring communities. Yams were central to both sustenance and ceremonial life, and could not be distributed for consumption until the appropriate rites had honoured the spiritual forces associated with their growth. The Minja ceremony was one of three linked harvest rituals, alongside Yena and Nogwi, each employing its own distinctive type of carving.

Although often described as masks because of their strongly expressive faces, Minja figures were not worn. They were displayed in pairs within or beside the men's ceremonial house, arranged around a temporary structure containing part of the yam harvest. The carvings were traditionally enhanced with pigments and ceremonial adornments, creating a powerful visual focus for ritual singing, dancing, feasting, and the celebration of fertility and abundance.

The present figure has the graphic, sculptural presence for which the art of the Washkuk Hills is admired: a boldly carved visage, emphatic features, and a direct, arresting expression. Its hand-worked surface and traces of age contribute to its strong presence as both a ceremonial object and a work of sculpture.

A remarkable example of early 20th-century Sepik art, offering a tangible connection to the ritual, agricultural, and artistic life of the Kwoma and related peoples. It would make a significant addition to a collection of Oceanic art, ceremonial sculpture, or early 20th-century ethnographic objects.

Originally acquired by Lieutenant-Colonel Sydney C. Lockyer-Nibbs during his service across the British Empire in the early to mid-20th century. Over this period, he assembled a notable collection of tribal art and ethnographic objects from Africa and the Far East.

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