



### **Lizard-Man or Tangata Moko**

A rare Lizard-Man or tangata moko (moai moko). The distinctive Lizard-Man figures (moko) of Rapa Nui (Easter Island) are composite beings with the heads and tails of lizards, the fan-like tails of birds, and the bodies of humans. Reportedly placed at the thresholds of dwellings or ceremonial structures or hung from interior rafters, the figures may depict powerful spirits, who served as supernatural guardians. Small lizard-man images were also worn as pendants by dancers during feasts. According to conventional characteristics the Lizard-Man is much more than an anthropo-zoomorphic entity whose identity is marked in the combination of its human and lizard features - the fluidity of these figures' movement, motion and composition clearly bring to mind the notion of metamorphosis. Easter Island, Eastern Polynesia. Wood (Sophora toromiro, commonly known as Toromiro). 56 cm. Second half of the 19th century.

In Easter Island, as in the Marquesas, Society, Austral, Cook, Hawaiian Islands and New Zealand, the mythology of lizard takes pride of place, as it comes and goes between the surface and the depths of the earth. According to Orliac (2008 : 142-143) "they are the hosts of graves and of the world of the dead; thus they carry the tale of the actions of the living and bring back to the light messages from the ancestors". They never appear as such in sculpture, but their features are visible in these famous Lizard-Men figures : Moai Tangata Moko. As with the rest of the Easter Island statuary, their importance remains mostly mysterious. According to Orliac (idem: 144), the poor reputation of lizards in Rapa Nui suggests that they are probably used to "protect humans against the ailments caused by certain reptiles that are evil or manipulated by sorcerers". As with each of the pieces in this corpus studied by Catherine and Michel Orliac, the present Lizard-Man was carved in an arched branch of a Sophora toromiro tree. This exclusivity highlights, according to Orliac (idem), the symbolic connection, stronger even than the bond with the other otherworldly dwellers, which this tree has with the reptilian entity. The present figure's size, the use of toromiro wood, the quality of the sculpture and the depth of the patina place the it amongst the fifty-known lizard-men figures, which were sculpted before 1870.

The study of the present Lizard Man (Meyer) by Catherine & Michel Orliac is available.

#### **Provenance:**

Private collection, France

#### **Exhibitions:**

Ile de Pâques. Les bois parlants  
Musée Champollion – Les Ecritures du Monde  
30 juin – 4 novembre 2018

**Literature:**

One other notable example is that in the André Breton collection (the Breton “Wall”), Musée national d'Art moderne, Centre Pompidou, Paris : AM 2003-3(108) which is so similar as to be possibly by the same hand.