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## Masterpiece or Mistake? A Hawaii Museum's \$7.5 Million Question



A statue of a Hawaiian war god bought at auction for about \$7.5 million is now the centerpiece of a major exhibition in Honolulu. But some experts say it might not be as old, or as valuable, as the auction house claimed. Credit Credit Jesse W. Stephen/Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum

**By Scott Reyburn**

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It was a generous gift — and one completely in tune with our cultural times.

In 2018, the tech billionaire Marc Benioff donated a wooden statue of a Hawaiian war god he had bought at auction for about \$7.5 million to the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum in Honolulu. The snarling, musclebound deity, known as “The Island Eater,” is now the centerpiece of [a major exhibition](#) there, exploring the role of traditional sculpture in Hawaiian culture and society.

This private act of restitution came amid a [growing clamor](#) for Western collections to return ethnographic artifacts to their places of origin.

Mr. Benioff, the chairman and chief executive of the software company Salesforce, said in a statement announcing the gift last July that he felt the sculpture “belonged in Hawaii, for the education and benefit of its people.”

At the sale in Paris, Christie’s said the wooden war god was about 200 years old. But now doubts have emerged about the sculpture’s age, inside and outside the Bishop Museum. Some international experts say the piece could be from the 20th century and worth less than \$5,000.

“It’s the sort of thing you see in a tiki bar,” said Daniel Blau, an expert in the art of the Pacific islands who is based in Munich.



One expert said he told Christie’s before the sale that the sculpture was the “mate” of a similar figure in the British Museum. Credit Trustees of the British Museum

Such a wide discrepancy in valuation could be a concern for the Internal Revenue Service, should Mr. Benioff wish to claim the donation on his tax return, as well for museumgoers having to pay as much as \$24.95 to see the sculpture in Honolulu.

Mr. Benioff, who would not comment for this article, [currently has a net worth of about \\$6.8 billion](#), according to Forbes. In September, he [bought Time magazine for \\$190 million](#). He strongly identifies with the spiritual values of Hawaii, where he owns a six-bedroom beachfront house. His desire to infuse the corporate culture of Salesforce with the “Aloha spirit” — including turning his employees’ Fridays into Hawaiian shirt days — has, however, led to [accusations of cultural appropriation](#).

Now questions are being asked about Mr. Benioff’s act of cultural repatriation. The Christie’s sale in Paris was the last of several from the [fabled private collection](#) of Pierre Vérité and his son Claude, both highly regarded dealers in tribal art. The elder Mr. Vérité had the distinction of selling artifacts to Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse and André Breton, among others.

[Lot 153 in Christie’s sale](#) was cataloged as “Hawaiian figure, kona style, circa 1780-1820, representing the god of war, ku ka ’ili moku.” Hitherto unknown, with no documented history of ownership, the 21-inch sculpture, carved from wood of the Hawaiian metrosideros tree, was thought to have been acquired by Pierre Vérité from the dealer and collector Marie-Ange Ciolkowska during the 1940s, according to Christie’s. It was estimated to sell for 2 million to 3 million euros, or \$2.3 million to \$3.4 million.