

Basic Detail Report



Portrait of Potatow and Portrait of Omai

Date

1784-1786

Primary Maker

Artist Unknown

Medium

engraving

Description

Potatow (or Potatau) was a chief of Punaauia, Tahiti. Hodges sketched his portrait in August of 1773 and John Hall later engraved it for the first volume of Cook's 1777 account of his second voyage. George Forster (German, 1754-1794), a naturalist who accompanied Cook, said of Potatau, "His ample garments, and his elegant white turban, set off his figure to the greatest advantage, and his noble deportment endeared him to us...." Hall's original engraving depicted a Tahitian chief with very European or even Middle Eastern attributes, but Hogg has done little to distinguish the physical features of Potatau from those of the man from Christmas Sound, Tierra del Fuego. Although the Tahitian chief is portrayed with a more regal demeanor, his cloak and turban do not accurately reflect the details of native costume that Hodges represented in his sketches. A Raiatean of relatively low status, Omai (Mai) joined Cook for the remainder of the second voyage and returned with him to England, where he stayed for two years. While in England, he was variously presented to British society as a Tahitian chief or the priest of a cult, and Sir Joshua Reynolds (English, 1723-1792), a founder and first president of the Royal Academy, painted a grand portrait of Mai during his visit. Hogg's engraver has roughly captured the long, softly curling hair that James Caldwell (English, 1739-ca. 1780) added to his original print for volume one of Cook's 1777 account, but otherwise Hogg's reproduction shows Mai seated in a stiff side profile with facial features very similar to the other Polynesian men illustrated in the publication. Absent the identifying caption, this could just as easily be a profile portrait of Potatau. Both depictions are types designed to fit into a generic European concept of Polynesian culture, rather than actual portraits of the sitters as individuals.

Dimensions

Sheet: 9 5/8 x 14 3/8 in. (24.4 x 36.5 cm)