

The Florida State Museum Eagle: A Glimpse of South Florida's Prehistoric Art

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For many years the Florida State Museum has used as its symbol a carved wood eagle effigy post which had been a donation to the museum in 1926 (Figure 1). A replica of this eagle post stands today in the museum lobby and is one of the first exhibits the museum visitor sees as he enters the door.

The chance discovery of the eagle post is credited to a local resident of Lakeport, Florida, who unearthed the figure near a then-unexplored Indian mound in Glades County, in south central Florida. The eagle post was unique. Lacking similar figures for stylistic comparison, the effigy was attributed to the Calusa Indians and given a tentative date of A.D. 1600.¹ Prehistoric wood artifacts are very rare, and the preservation of this particular piece is due to the four feet of muck that covered it and protected the wood from the atmosphere and certain disintegration.

The eagle and post measure 5 feet 2 inches in height. The eagle figure alone measures 2 feet. Although carved from the heartwood of yellow pine which is a light-colored wood, centuries of being submerged in the water and muck have left the effigy post a dark brown. Softer parts of the wood have worn away, leaving the grain raised in relief, a condition caused by time and erosion. One can assume that the original figure had a smoothly carved exterior and, in the custom of other prehistoric works of the area, was probably painted. The wings of the eagle are partially extended in a menacing and protective manner. The head is bent forward in the alert pose of a sentry.² After many centuries, the talent of the unknown artist is still apparent.

The eagle post was not the first piece of prehistoric carved wood to be found in south Florida. In 1895, several extremely well-preserved wood articles were excavated at the Gulf Coast site of Key Marco in Collier County. The animal forms were easily recognizable and, in some cases, the original paint was still visible. As in Glades County, the remarkable state of preservation was due to the layers of muck that had covered them.

Glades County is approximately 80 miles from Key Marco, and Indian mounds exist in both locations as they do in many areas of Florida (Figure 2). The Glades County Indian mound, where the eagle was discovered, is located on a high dry hammock on Fisheating Creek, four miles west of Lake Okeechobee. The creek provides a convenient link between the lake and inland areas, as important a factor to today's hunters and fishermen as it must have been to prehistoric Indians. During the Indian Removal of the mid-1800s,³ the hammock served as the site of an early U.S. Army post, reflected in the name, Fort Center. 2,000 years ago, however, the hammock and surrounding area were inhabited by Indians of the Belle Glade Culture. The foundations of the Belle Glade tradition were perhaps established by peoples who had moved down the Gulf Coast of Florida and into the Okeechobee Basin as early as 1000

B.C.⁴ Another suggestion as the source of the Basin population is a possible migration of peoples from northern South America through the Antilles.⁵ Whether settled from the north or south, there is evidence of established human occupation of the southwestern Florida coast before 1000 B.C., and further evidence that Fort Center was being used as a year-round living site by 500 B.C.⁶ Pollen samples have been tested to prove that by 450 B.C., crops of maize were being grown in large circular plots,⁷ and it has been suggested that the move inland from the coast may have been prompted by the desire to cultivate maize, since the coastal regions were unsuitable for farming.⁸

The Fort Center mound had been mentioned in military survey reports as early as the 1850s,⁹ but it wasn't until 1964, that Dr. William Hulse Sears of the Florida State Museum conducted an excavation of the site. This particular area was selected for study because it appeared to have had a long history of occupation, and the mounds and earthworks, typical of the Okeechobee Basin, indicated ceremonial activity. Not the least of the reasons was the "possibility for (finding) preserved wood material" signalled by the discovery of the eagle effigy post forty years earlier.¹⁰

Sears' excavations at Fort Center revealed a large agricultural and ceremonial complex exhibiting evidence of over 2,000 years of occupation.¹¹ The sizeable dimensions of the agricultural and ceremonial areas may be an indication that the site served as a religious center for more than the immediate surrounding area.¹² Although the dates of the agricultural plots were much earlier, the ceremonial complex was constructed and in use between the years A.D. 1-500. The complex consisted of two earthen platform mounds and a man-made pond situated between them.¹³ The mound to the east of the pond was fairly low and provided an elevated base for five or six wooden living structures, possibly for priests or other members of the religion.¹⁴ The west side mound was higher and evidently served as a base for a charnel house in which bodies of the deceased were stripped of flesh and the bones assembled in bundles. These bone bundles were eventually placed on a large wood mortuary platform built over the pond, and it is estimated that there were approximately 300 bundle burials on the platform at the time of its collapse in A.D. 500.¹⁵ Some of the bundles were retrieved from the water and buried in a mound near the pond, but the remaining bundles and platform had been submerged in the muck of the pond bottom for almost 2,000 years.¹⁶

For the art historian, it is the mortuary platform that provides the greatest interest (Figure 3). Constructed in the center of the pond, the wood platform was supported by large bird and animal effigy posts set around its perimeter. Smaller figures on posts added to the foundations of the platform, and other, even smaller, figures provided added

symbolism or decoration. The similarity of the effigy posts on the platform and the Florida State Museum eagle post connected the museum eagle to the mortuary platform and moved the date of the eagle back 1000 years.

The majority of sculptures on the mortuary platform were of birds. The larger carved images, without the posts, ranged in size from three to five feet.¹⁷ Recognizable figures included eagles, hawks, foxes, dogs, cats (which probably represented bobcats or panthers) and a possible bear. Almost all the smaller figures were of birds, with the exception of one panther and two otter sculptures, one of which is still exceptional for a graceful fluidity of line (Figure 4). The Indians of Fort Center were well acquainted with the mannerisms and mobility of the creatures around them and were able to translate this knowledge expertly into their wood sculptures.

As in the museum eagle, pine was used as the carving medium for all the wood figures. In creating their sculptures, the Indian artists had taken into consideration the natural shape of the wood pieces, using the knots and branches to their advantage. The carving of hard wood would have been a lengthy process since they lacked any hard stone deposits for implements in south Florida; much of the sculpting was done using shell tools with the finer carving done by using small sharks' teeth knives. Thus, finding wood pieces that naturally conformed to the image to be carved was a practical and time-saving device. Final smoothing and polishing of the sculptures was accomplished by rubbing the wood with rough fibers or fine sand.

The most apparent stylistic characteristic in the Fort Center carvings is that of naturalism; this element is also strongly represented in the sculptures of Key Marco (Figure 5). Wood carvings from another south Florida site at Belle Glade reveal a style similar to that of Fort Center, as well as duplicating several of the animal forms—namely, the eagle, duck, woodpecker and otter (Figure 6). Although the surfaces of the Fort Center sculptures are much worn, and the artistic details have been obliterated, the overall resemblance to the Belle Glade figures is obvious. Because of the proximity of the sites, both in geographic location and time, one can probably assume that the Fort Center sculptures were created with similar detail.

Another artistic similarity between these south Florida wood carvings is the emphasis of the eye. In a very naturalistic figure, these south Florida sculptures usually have an enlarged, and even stylized, eye, a particularly easy convention to follow in the bird sculptures since most live birds have a round, "beady" eye. This stylized eye is especially apparent in the Belle Glade carvings.

Based on the research of three south Florida prehistoric sites containing carved wood sculpture, the elements of the very early art style in this area seem to be 1) naturalism and 2) a noticeable emphasis of the eye (in an otherwise naturalistic figure).

In considering any art style, it is necessary to investigate possible outside influences. Even in these very early

days, the North American Indian did not live in a vacuum and there is evidence of trade in south Florida with amazingly distant places. To the north, simultaneous with the growth of the ceremonial complex at Fort Center, was the florescence of the Hopewell cult, centered around Ohio and Illinois. Associated with this northern cult were earthworks, mounds and an extensive trading of ceremonial objects. Some Hopewell-related items have been unearthed at Fort Center, leading one to wonder how much the Hopewell art style, reaching south Florida through trade, might have influenced the art style of Fort Center. Hopewell sculptures, usually created in stone, are very realistic but static in style as compared to the fluidity of the south Florida figures. A similarity between the two regions is the preponderance of bird figures in their art, although the Hopewell birds and animals are always portrayed with a small, round, "beady" eye (Figure 7).

Closer to home, trade with northern Florida sites, indicated by regional pottery sherds, seems to have had little influence on the Fort Center style. Weeden Island pottery, coming into prominence as the ceremonial activity at Fort Center declined,¹⁸ lacks the fluid quality of the more southern regions, and figures also usually exhibit a small, round eye (Figure 8).

In tracing prehistoric Indian art styles, it is often valuable to research early historic records as to the beliefs and customs of the existing North American Indians at the time of first European contact. Sixteenth century accounts of the Spanish missionary priests living in south Florida refer to an Indian idol who "ate human eyes."¹⁹ Once a year, a human sacrifice, usually an unfortunate shipwrecked Spanish sailor, was offered to the idol. Naturally, the sensationalism of the event to the Spanish priests would lead them to record the aspect of human sacrifice. It is not recorded, however, whether animal sacrifices might not have been offered to the idol during other times of the year.

Also, recorded by the Spanish at the time of European contact, was the Calusa belief that each man had three souls. One was his reflection in clear water; another was the shadow his body cast in the sun. The third soul dwelt in a man's eyes and was the one soul that remained with the body after death.²⁰ Beliefs in slowly changing societies can be retained for centuries, and it may be that this interest in the eye, so important to the Calusas in the 1500s, might have existed 1,000 years earlier and been manifested in the eyes of their wood sculptures.

Whether self-initiated or inspired from outside influences, a distinctive prehistoric art style is slowly being uncovered in south Florida through the archaeological investigations of the last few decades. More research is needed before the archaeological pieces of the puzzle fit into place to reveal the entire picture. However, the carved wood eagle from Fort Center is more than just an emblem of the Florida State Museum. Representing a distinctive prehistoric art style, the eagle has been instrumental in bringing the south Florida Indians out of obscurity.

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- 1 Anonymous (*Scientific American*), 293.
- 2 The original head of the eagle figure was missing, and the head appearing on the effigy today is a reconstruction by the Florida State Museum based on another eagle effigy found in the same location several years later.
- 3 Legislation in Washington, D.C. in 1850 ceded the Indian Territories of central Florida over to the State of Florida. The Indian Removal of that time was an attempt to round up the remaining Indians in the area and send them to officially designated Indian reservations, thus clearing the land for Florida settlers.
- 4 Goggin, 1949, 30.
- 5 Sears, 1982, 191.
- 6 Milanich and Fairbanks, 184.
- 7 Sears, 1982, 193.
- 8 Milanich and Fairbanks, 184.
- 9 Benson, ms.
- 10 Sears, 1971, 325.
- 11 Sears, 1982, 191.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 197.
- 13 Morgan, 33.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 Sears, 1982, 196.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 Sears, 1982, 42.
- 18 Milanich and Fairbanks, 23.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 249.
- 20 Lewis, C., 35.

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Fig. 1, Eagle effigy post, Fort Center
(photo: Florida State Museum).



Fig. 2, Indian sites in South Florida containing
prehistoric carved wood.

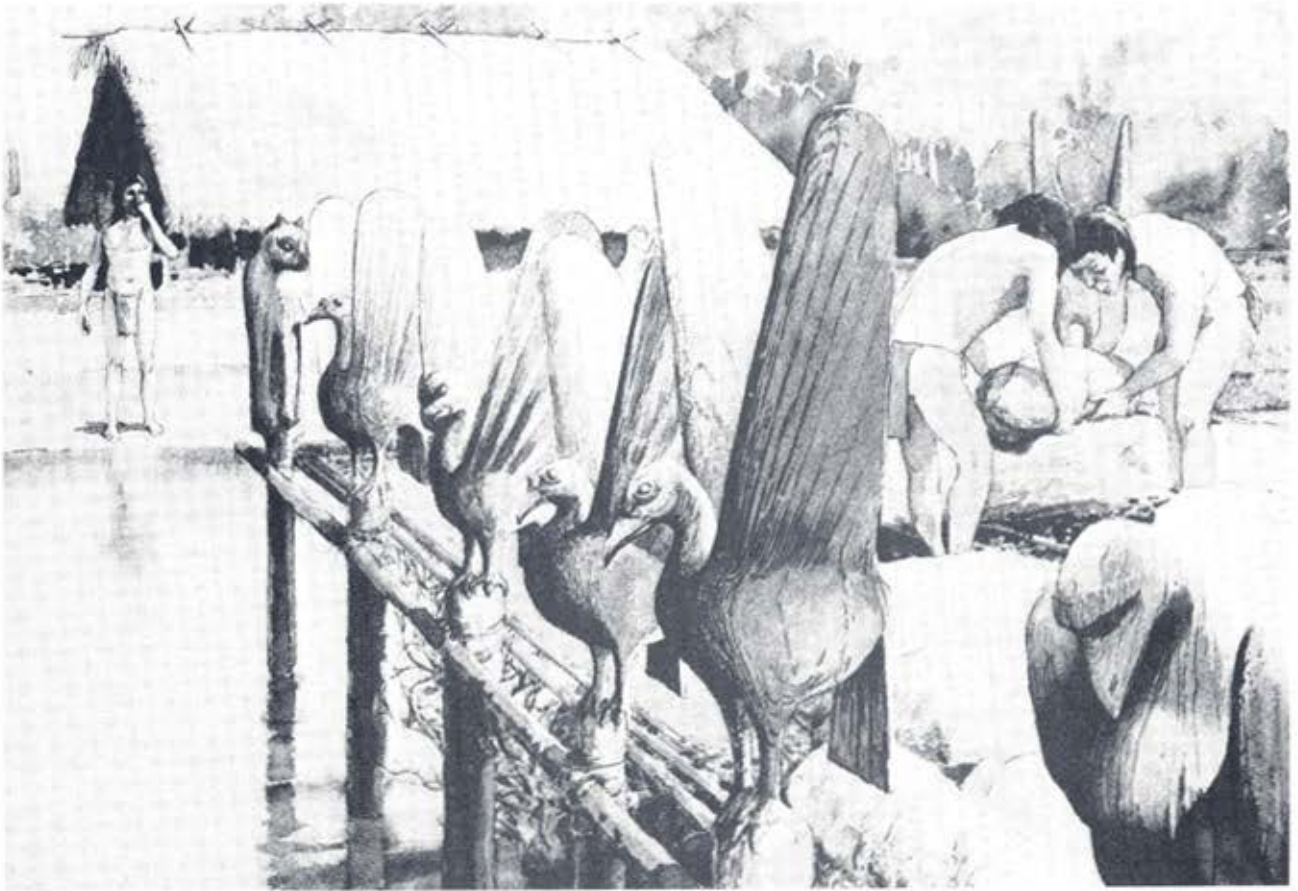


Fig. 3, Artist's conception of the mortuary platform at Fort Center. Artist: Gordon Miller (MacDonald and Purdy, 4-5).

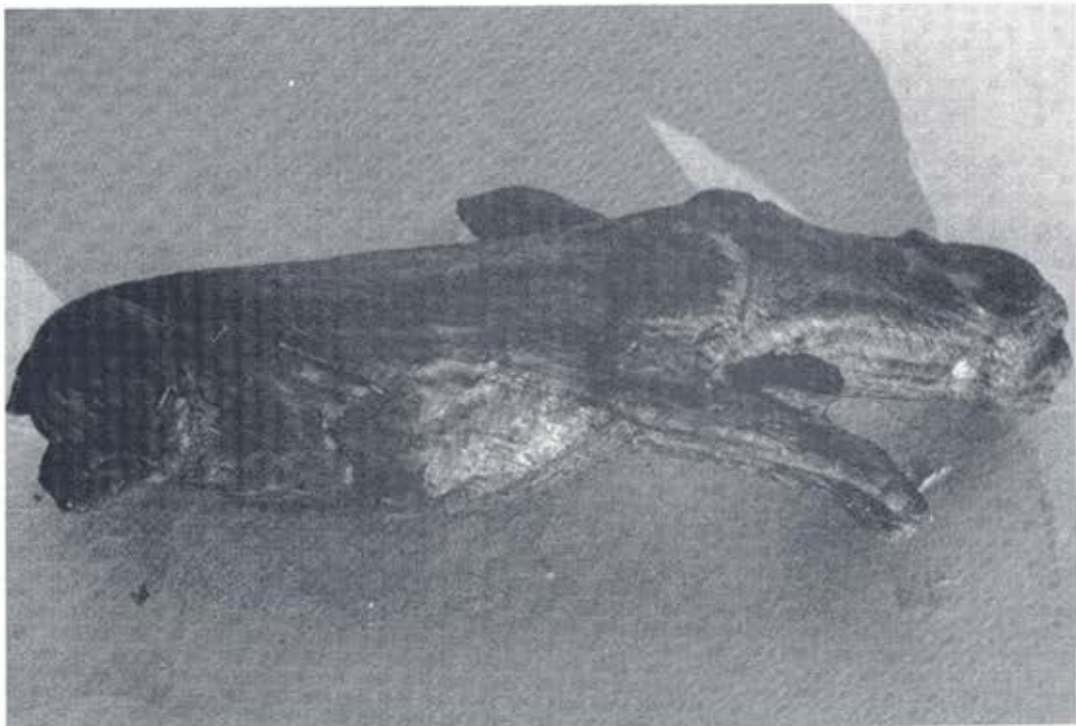


Fig. 4, Carved otter effigy, Fort Center (photo: Florida State Museum).



Fig. 5. Deer figurehead, Key Marco (Covarrubias, plate XLI).

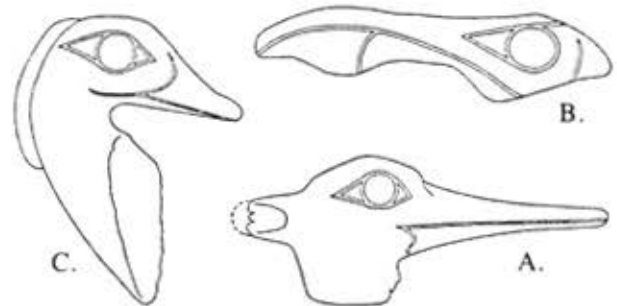
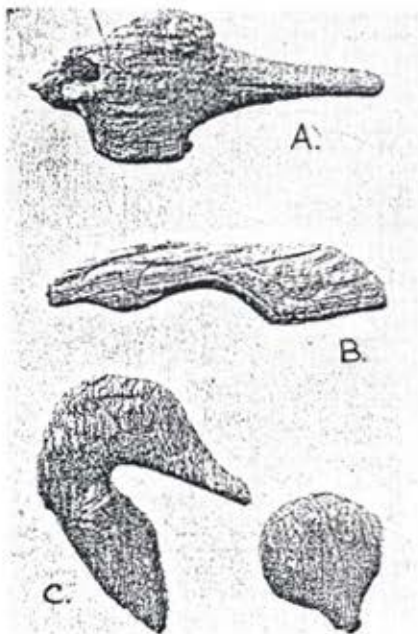


Fig. 6. Carved bird heads from Belle Glade (photo: Stirling, plate 1; drawings: Willey, 55).



Fig. 7, Classic Hopewell effigy pipes (photo: Dockstader, fig. 22).

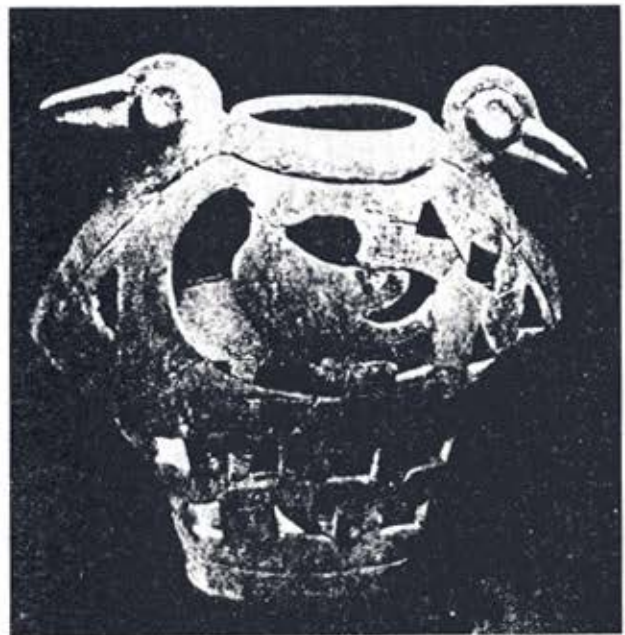
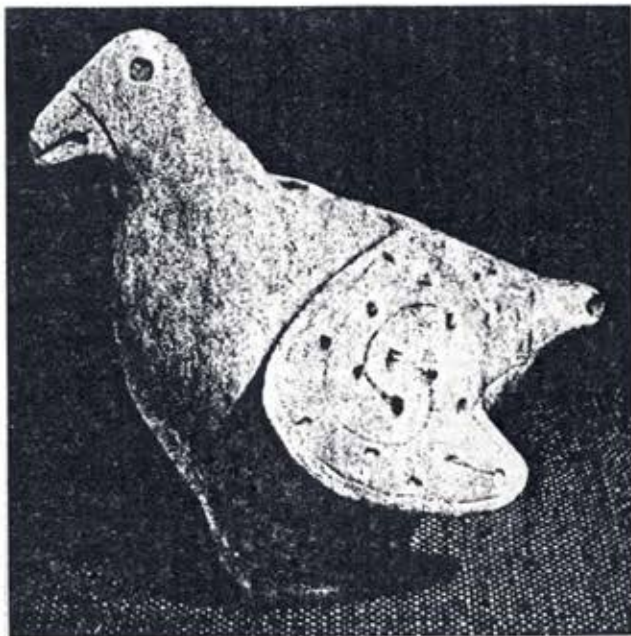


Fig. 8, Weeden Island Effigy Jars (photo: Dockstader, fig. 45).