



Chief's hat - hunting visor

On display

Title/Description: Chief's hat - hunting visor

Object Type: Figure

Materials: beads, Pigment, Sea lion whiskers, Sinew, Walrus ivory, Wood (driftwood)

Technique: Carving, Drilling, Painting, Sewing

Accession Number: RLS 68

Historic Period: 1790s - 1840s

Production Place: Alaska, North America, St. Lawrence Island (?), The Americas

Cultural Group: Ungangan (Aleut)

Credit Line: Bequeathed by Lady Sainsbury, 2014

This beautiful bent driftwood hunting visor is distinctively Aleut and known as *qayaatux^{ux}* or Chief's hat in the Unangan Tunuu language. This highly decorative hat with walrus ivory sidepieces (volute) and ivory back would have belonged to a leading figure in the community such as the Chief, the spiritual leader (shaman) or a prominent hunter. [1] The amount of sea-lion whiskers counted the successful hunts that the wearer would have led. The birds on top of the back ornament and the volutes - one missing - indicate spiritual helpers. The large red glass beads were Chinese trade beads [2] and offer some indication when it was made, namely 1840 - 1873 or pre-1840s. [3] The hat has a "sand dollar" design with the circles at the back with a cross. The back also has small spurs might be sea lice or sort-like creatures.

Qayaatux^{ux}, like this example, as markers of wealth and position were highly prized possession that could cost more than an umiaq or one to several slaves. [4] Yet, the *Qayaatux^{ux}* also signified Unangan spirituality and the intricateness of life. Or as Ungangan scholar Ilarion Mercurieff writes about the *Qayaatux^{ux}*:

The nature of Unangan spirituality can be gleaned from the art and paintings on the wooden hats used in rituals and ceremonies or worn during the hunt or wars. Unangan men believed that the hunted animal is to be honored, so the hunter comes in his finest. The Unangan bent-wood hat frequently includes four- or eight-petal rosettes, indicating the use of the "sacred four" known in many Indigenous traditions around the world, and the famous Flower of Life, which has been found, for example, in Egyptian and Mayan glyphs. It contains the patterns of creation as they emerged

from the “Great Void.”

The wings of the hat, called volutes, are made of ivory and display a spiritual worldview in their design that includes the “third eye,” balance of the masculine and feminine, one’s spiritual center, and the center of all Creation. The volutes were all carved differently, depending on where one was from and what station the person had as a hunter. However, all volutes contain a “hidden” message of Unangan spirituality.

The volute itself, when turned on its side, is shaped like a bird or bird’s beak, signifying the Thunderbird. The Thunderbird was known to our people as a bird with the power of death—a reminder that we must die the “small deaths” if we are to live. These small deaths may be loss of a loved one, a home, a friend, death of someone you cared about, death of the old “you” and birth of the new, etc. The piece, ranging from six to eight inches in length, would be carved with a curve on its length, ending in a spiral. The spiral represented Agox, the Maker of all Creation, which never ends—our people knew that life was a circle, but a changing circle. In the center of the spiral was the third eye, our center, and the center of the universe. The stem of the volute conveys the understanding that male and female aspects in all creation must be balanced in order to live as a real human being. Even the land, I found out, has a male and female aspect. A phallic symbol appears on the stem along with circles with dots in the center to indicate the “sacred circle” and the center; designs of three circles attached to one “originating” circle denote the sacred feminine number three, and the place from which we originated.

Intricate designs on the hat may depict a hunting story, or animals and birds. The hat, like all other Unangan objects, had a practical use. The beautiful hunting hat, with its elongated visor, was made specifically for the volatile Bering Sea; to prevent being blinded by oncoming waves, the hunter would simply look down whenever a wave broke across the bow of the craft. [5]

The beauty of the *qayaatux^{ux}* does hide a darker narrative of Russian colonialization and the Russian-American Company. [6] Between 1790s until 1823, a time of increased violence and enslavement of Aleut with the instalment of Alexander Baranov as first Russian Company’s chief manager of Kodiak District [7], Russian Imperial officers that led naval expeditions to the Bering Sea ‘were instructed to distribute bronze, silver, and gold medals to the [Aleut] chiefs’. [8] Both the distributions by the naval officers and the increasing influence of the Russian Company transformed the hereditary and social distinctions imminent in Aleut lives into transformed hierarchical distinctions between chiefs, sub-chiefs, and commoners. Whereas Aleut hunters had previously only worn the open hunting visor, these *qayaatux^{ux}* started to emerge with this hierarchical transformation of Unangan lives. [9] Influential Unangan would wear this closed top while the commoner Unangan would continue to wear them open on hunting expeditions for sea-otter, sea lions, or other sea mammals or birds. The *qayaatux^{ux}* became obsolete by the early 1900s. Unangan land was now part of the American colonial regime and its assimilation policies. Famine and diseases would further disseminate Unangan lives. Beautiful *qayaatux^{ux}*, such as this one, that had been in the possession of Unangan political and spiritual leaders would have been sold or illegally required by outside collectors, scholars, or others somewhere along the line of colonial presence in Unangan lives.

Peter Loovers, February 2022

[1] See a similar one at National Museum of the American Indian (object number, 144871.000) and a discussion about that visor at <https://alaska.si.edu/record.asp?id=455> [accessed 30 September 2021]

[2] See Jean-Loup Rousselot, William W. Fitzhugh, and Aron Crowell, 'Maritime Economies of the North Pacific Rim', in *Crossroads of Continents: Cultures of Siberia and Alaska*, ed. by William W. Fitzhugh and Aron L. Crowell, (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988). Pp. 151-172, (p.161).

[3] Peter Francis Jnr, Appendix I: Beads and Bead Trade in the North Pacific Region, in *Crossroads of Continents: Cultures of Siberia and Alaska*, ed. by William W. Fitzhugh and Aron L. Crowell, (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988). Pp, 341, (p.341)

[4] Quimby, George Irving. 1944. *Aleutian Islanders: Eskimos of the North Pacific*. Chicago: National History Museum Press

[5] Mercurieff, Ilarion. 2016. *Wisdom Keeper: One Man's Journey to Honor the Untold History of the Unangan People*. Berkeley: North Atlantic Book. P. 5-6

[6] Mercurieff, Ilarion. 2016. *Wisdom Keeper: One Man's Journey to Honor the Untold History of the Unangan People*. Berkeley: North Atlantic Book. Chapter 2

[7] Loovers, Jan Peter Laurens. 2020. Trade in the Bering Strait. In *Arctic: Culture and Climate*. Amber Lincoln, Jago Cooper, and Jan Peter Laurens Loovers (eds.). Pp. 242-254. London: Thames & Hudson in collaboration with The British Museum

[8] Ray, Dorothy Jean. 1981. *Aleut and Eskimo Art: Tradition and Innovation in South Alaska*. Seattle: University of Washington Press. P. 32

[9] Ibid. P. 32

Provenance

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury at Phillips Son and Neale auction on 9 December 1996.

Bequeathed to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia by Lady Sainsbury in 2014.
