



Ceremonial mask

Not on display

Title/Description: Ceremonial mask

Born: 1800 - 1899

Object Type: Mask

Materials: Pigment, Whalebone

Technique: Carving, Drilling

Measurements: h. 193 x w. 160 x d. 60 mm

Accession Number: 111

Historic Period: 19th century

Production Place: Alaska, North America, The Americas, Tikigaq (Point Hope), United States of America

Cultural Group: Iñupiat

This Inupiat whale bone mask still contains traces of pigment with the green tints around the eyes as if it is wearing snow goggles. This mask, which could have been used by an *aṅatquq* [spiritual leader, medicine man or shaman] for ceremonial purposes or made to be sold to outsiders, is likely to be a female due to the absence of labrets. In Tikigaq (Point Hope), *aṅatquq* could have been both men and women. It was not unusual to have a women healer in a household. [1] While life changed in Tikigaq with commercial non-Indigenous whaling from 1850 onwards, the Episcopal missionaries (since 1889), and further settler colonialism, were more disruptive for traditional ceremonies and the role of the *aṅatquq* in the community. [2] *Aṅatquq*, and their practices and ceremonies, were deemed devilish and prohibited. This would also impact the form and style of the masks.

Historically, the *aṅatquq* would be “invited by the spirits” [3] and travel to the spirit world to gain further knowledge or solutions for specific problems such as illness. Upon return, the *aṅatquq* would carve, or instruct someone else to carve, the encountered *tungai* (‘spirits or souls of dead men or animals’). [4] The carved *tungai* appear as normal or distorted faces on wooden masks. During the visit to the spirit-world, the *aṅatquq* learned powerful song(s) from the *tungai* and belonged to specific masks. These songs, which were often personal or private, could for example bring up a whale or dismantle an enemy’s bowstring. Others songs were shared as part of a repertoire of seasonal ceremonies in the *qalgi* (men’s house or ceremonial space) and mostly related to whaling. [5]

With the impact of settler colonialism, most of these private hunting songs and the public ceremonial songs have disappeared and replaced by Christian hymns. [6] Important seasonal ceremonies related to whaling, such as *Kivgiq* (the Messenger Feast), however, have been revitalised in a reshaped version since 1988. [7] Nevertheless, the use of wooden masks of *tungai* have become obsolete in the *qalgi*. Instead, more recent whale bone masks have incorporated the diversity of humanity and are almost exclusively made as “souvenir art” for financial means to continue traditional activities such as whaling.

This enigmatic mask might be exemplary of the transition between ceremonial masks and souvenir art or marks the impacts of settler colonialism in Inupiat lives. Whatever lies behind the mask, the incorporation of whale bone signifies the importance that whales had and continue to have in Inupiat communities.

Peter Loovers, February 2022

[1] Edith Turner, ‘From Shamans to Healers: The Survival of an Inupiaq Eskimo Skill’. *Anthropologica*, 1 (1989), pp. 3-24 (p.5)

[2] Edith Turner, ‘From Shamans to Healers: The Survival of an Inupiaq Eskimo Skill’. *Anthropologica*, 1(1989), pp. 3-24 (p.8); James W. Vanstone, *Point Hope: An Eskimo Village in Transition*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1962), p.156-7

[3] Froelich G. Rainey, *The Whale Hunters of Tigara*. Anthropological Papers of the American

Museum of National History, 41(2), (New York: The American Museum of National History, 1947), p. 275

[4] James W. Vanstone, *Masks of the Point Hope Eskimo*. *Anthropos, Nomos* 63/64(1969), pp. 828-840

[5] Froelich G. Rainey, *The Whale Hunters of Tigara*. *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of National History*, 41(2), (New York: The American Museum of National History, 1947).

[6] Chie Sakakibara, *Whale Snow: Iñupiat, Climate Change, and Multispecies Resilience in Arctic Alaska*, (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2020)

[7] Hiroko Ikuta, Hiroko, *Iñupiaq pride: Kivgiq (Messenger Feast) on the Alaskan North Slope*, *Études/Inuit/Studies* 31(2007), pp. 343-364

Provenance

Formerly in the collection of Worsae, a Swedish explorer and navigator, who collected the object on his travels in the mid-nineteenth century.

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from K. J. Hewett in 1957.

Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.
