



# Mask

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**Not on display**

**Title/Description:** Mask

**Measurements:** h. 105 x w. 86 x d. 24 mm

**Accession Number:** 112

**Historic Period:** 19th century (?)

**Credit Line:** Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

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The facial expression of this exquisite Inupiat whale bone mask is beautifully carved with closed or narrowly opened eyes and notable jawbones. This mask is clearly identifiable as a male Inupiat by the two ivory labrets at the corners of the mouth. [1] Unlike other Inuit where women also wore labrets, only Inupiat men generally wore labrets up until early 1900s with the arrival of missionaries. The labrets were made from ivory, like this mask illustrates, and inserted at either side of the lip of a young boy to mark the coming of age. Nuvuk (Point Barrow) Inupiaq would treat the newly inflicted wounds with urine. [2] Wearing labrets, thus, showed that the boy had transitioned into adulthood. [3]

Inupiaq whale bone masks are mostly identified as more recent “souvenir art” that were sold to outsiders in contrast to wooden masks that had ceremonial purposes. [4] Historically, whale bone masks were primarily made in two Inupiaq communities, Kivalina and Tikigaq (Point Hope), but other communities, especially Shishmaref, have taken up the carving technique since the 1970s. [5] A 3,000-year old whale bone mask recently found on Amaknak Island, Eastern Aleutian Islands, shows that whale bone masks were not exclusively Inupiat and held a much older and longer history. [6] This is in line with two whale bone masks of considerable antiquity that had been excavated at an old village near Port Möller, Eastern Aleutian Islands, Alaska, in 1928. [7]

Allegedly, following SVCA’s provenance, this mask was found by a Swedish explorer and navigator named Worsae in the nineteenth century. That would make this an earlier example of an Inupiat whale bone mask. However, it needs to be noted there has not been a Swedish Arctic explorer with the name Worsae. Instead, the collector might have been Jens Jacob Asmussen Worsaae (1821-1885), who was an archaeologist, historian, politician, and more importantly the Director of National Museum of Denmark from 1865-1874. Worsaae was instrumental in the theoretical development of social evolution and was a fervent collector of different objects to support these evolutionary (read: colonial) ideas.

Whilst we cannot ascertain what the exact purpose was for this mask, perhaps it was sold as souvenir art to whalers or had ceremonial purposes, the carver conveyed Inupiaq traditions through the incorporation of labrets and carving unique facial features.

Peter Loovers, February 2022

[1] Robert Fortuine. 1985. *Lancets of Stone: Traditional Methods of Surgery among the Alaska Natives*. *Arctic Anthropology*, 22(1): 23-25. Pp. 24 ; John Weyhouanna’s mask for modern Inupiaq example from Shishmaref ,  
<http://www.maruskiyas.com/store/products/whalebone-mask-with-double-ivory-inlay-john-weyiouanna>

[2] Robert F. Spencer. 1959. *The North Alaskan Eskimo: A Study in Ecology and Society*. Washington: US Government Printing Office. Pp. 328

[3] Robert F. Spencer. 1959. *The North Alaskan Eskimo: A Study in Ecology and Society*. Washington: US Government Printing Office. Pp. 242

[4] James Vanstone. 1969. *Masks of Point Hope Eskimos*. *Anthropos*, 63/64 (5/6): Pp. 828-840.

[5] Susan Fair. 1985. *Alaska Native Arts and Crafts*. Anchorage: Alaska Geographic Society. Pp. 92-93

[6] Jason S. Rogers and Evguenia V. Anichtchenko. 2011. *A Whalebone Mask from Amaknak Island, Eastern Aleutian Islands, Alaska*. *Arctic Anthropology*, 48(1): 66-79

[7] Edward Moffat Weyer. 1930. *Archaeological Material from the Village Site at Hot Springs, Port Möller, Alaska*. New York City: The American Museum of National History

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## **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 1956.

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

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