



Club/baton

Not on display

Title/Description: Club/baton

Born: 1800 - 1899

Object Type: Club

Materials: Abalone shell, Caribou antler

Measurements: l. 445 x w. 445 x d. 70 mm

Accession Number: 120

Historic Period: 19th century - Early/Mid

Production Place: North America, Northwest Coast, The Americas

Cultural Group: Tlingit, Tsimshian

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

Antler clubs of this kind, of which about ten are known, are often referred to as 'slave killers', though no evidence exists to confirm that this was indeed their primary function. It is more likely that they were used as a kind of sceptre, the possession of which enhanced the prestige and splendid appearance of the owner on formal occasions. They are usually attributed to the Tsimshian, but this fine example could also be Tlingit.

All are carved with animal features. This one has the head of a bear with tongue protruding, while the surface of the club is engraved with a complex of designs, more clearly visible in the diagram, depicting the body of the bear and another creature. On the bear the oval shoulder and hip joints, linked by a three-section backbone, connect to long curling claws. Although bears are typically depicted with claws, this design has certain seal characteristics, making our animal no ordinary bear, but probably a creature which featured in a myth associated with the family or ancestors of the owner. One such mythic creature is called the sea bear, which has both bear and killer whale attributes.

Below the 'bear', and facing away from it, is a wide-mouthed creature, possibly a killer whale. This may be the work of a different hand, since the engraving is not so crisp and the ovals which form the eyes are not carved in the same style as the joints of the main 'bear'. The designs on the projecting leg of the club do not seem to be part of the main animal, and may be decorative filler. The slit in the projection is square-cut and is unlikely to have been for a blade; no example with an original blade exists, and it is likely that the split had symbolic significance. The butt and the top of the bear's head are pierced, possibly for feather attachments.

This club has no collection data associated with it and none of the others have collection information which predates 1860. However, this form of club or baton has great antiquity in the region; MacDonald (1983:112) illustrates a miniature antler club with an animal head and bifurcated projection which dates to about AD 100.

Comparison of this example with specimens of elk, caribou and moose antler shows this to be caribou. The top of the bear's head was the base of the antler and his nose was the base of the first tine. A further tine once emerged above the handgrip (visible on a fine club in Philadelphia; Maurer, 1977: 306) but this has been cut away. Antler is a hard material, but its surface can be softened for carving by immersion in water. As with many other carvings, this prestigious object is made from highly valued foreign materials, antler from the interior and abalone shell from the south (ultimately California). It is likely to have been made for a chief who had the right to display this 'bear' crest, though a smaller example of the type once belonged to a nineteenth-century Tsimshian shaman (Phelps, 1976: pl. 181).

Steven Hooper, 1997

Entry taken from *Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection, Vol. 2: Pacific, African and Native North*

American Art, edited by Steven Hooper (Yale University Press, 1997) pp. 181-182.

TO-BE-REPLACED-WITH-A-GAP

A detailed relief carved antler inlaid with abalone shell and shaped like a bear, this club was not a weapon so much as a marker of identity and power. It was once owned by a powerful chieftain, and was carried at potlatches and other ceremonies as a badge of office and a method of connecting with, and channelling, the spirits at ceremonial events.

Exhibitions

'Empowering Art: Indigenous Creativity and Activism from North America's Northwest Coast',
Sainsbury Centre, Norwich, 12/3/23 - 30/7/23

Sacred Circles (Cat.298), Hayward Gallery, London,

Oct 1976 to Jan 1977

Provenance

Purchased by K. J. Hewett on behalf of Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, at Christie, Manson and Woods, Ltd. auction on 7 November 1957, Lot 8.

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