



Dagger with bird head pommel

Not on display

Title/Description: Dagger with bird head pommel

Born: 1850 - 1899

Object Type: Dagger

Materials: Abalone shell, Copper, Leather, Musk-ox horn

Measurements: l. 559 x w. 70 x d. 70 mm

Accession Number: 126

Historic Period: 19th Century - Late

Production Place: North America, Northwest Coast, The Americas

Cultural Group: Klukwan, Tlingit

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

This dagger is one of a corpus of about fifteen examples in this style which appear to be the work of a single workshop, probably located at Klukwan around the end of the nineteenth century. Four daggers in the University Museum of Pennsylvania were collected by the director, Gordon, in Klukwan in 1905; none of the others have collection data which predate 1900 (see Collins et al., 1973: 260; Maurer, 1977: 309).

These daggers demonstrate considerable technical sophistication. A rib of copper is applied to the top of the trapezoid-section blade and is set with tiny rivets and commercial solder. Witthoft and Eyman (1969: 14) observed that this workmanship meets 'the standards of an expert modern mechanic', and it is probable that a small group of skilled Tlingit craftsmen produced a series of daggers for local ceremonial use, though several were soon acquired by museum collectors such as Gordon and Emmons, who were scouring the area at the time (see Cole, 1985).

Witthoft and Eyman also analysed several examples and found that the horn used for the handle and pommel was musk-ox, and that the copper for the blade was very pure but did not come from the expected sources on the Copper River of Alaska or the Coppermine River of northern Canada. It seems likely that these materials were obtained from Europeans, and not via the traditional trade routes.

The pommels are mostly of horn with copper backing and applied copper strips (as here), though

some are of copper only. The animals represented also vary, possibly because particular crests were required by different clients. This example has the head of an owl or hawk, others have the head of a bear, wolf or eagle. It is unlikely that these daggers were ever used in combat, rather they were part of the impressive costume worn by eminent people on formal occasions such as potlatches.

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) p. 272.

TO-BE-REPLACED-WITH-A-GAP

Copper is sacred to the peoples of the Northwest Coast, a rare metal used both as a status symbol and a means of supernatural communication. Originally meteoric copper was traded with the Inupiat peoples to the north, but later 'ship's copper' was acquired in large quantities from the hulls of traders' sailing ships. Carried as symbols of status and identity, it was a marker of the wealthiest and most successful chieftains.

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 Robert and Sainsbury from K. J. Hewett in 1963.

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