



Toggle or fastener

Not on display

Title/Description: Toggle or fastener

Born: 1800 c. - 1899 c.

Object Type: Implement

Materials: Walrus ivory

Technique: Carving, Drilling

Accession Number: 432

Historic Period: 19th century

Production Place: Alaska, Bering Strait, North America, The Americas

Cultural Group: Yupiit or Iñupiat

The seal looks startled yet alertly out of the water. Likely this was the image that the carver had in mind as he beautifully and eloquently carved the seal head with nostrils, eyes, and ears. But what could the carving be used for? Perhaps as a toggle or kayak fastener or a needle case ornament? Then, again, perhaps it was used as a spear guard or perhaps a finger rest for a harpoon? Or, in the end, maybe it was a hunting charm? Seal imageries were carved in a multitude of objects used for various purposes.

Certainly, toggles in the shape of seals or seal heads can be found in various museums and are quite common. [1] Using the toggle, or drag handle, an Inuk hunter would drag a dead seal across the ice to the sled, kayak, or hunting camp. Needle cases ornaments, too, have been associated with seals. [2] The hunted seal would have been given to the hunter's wife or female relation. Seal skins have been crucial for Inuk seamstresses to make clothing and footwear or for rope and thread. Hunting seals also took place in open waters with kayaks. The tip of the (sealing) harpoon would have been placed in the spear guard (pl. *nayiguyaq*) to prevent it from falling overboard whilst the hunter moved closer to the seal. [3] The figure of a seal also has been used as finger-rests for harpoons. [4] The finger rests aided with the throwing by hand of the larger and heavier harpoons. [5]

The bottom of this Bering Strait carving offers some clues that this object most likely was a toggle [6] or fastener. There are four holes where a skin rope (often made from bearded seal) would have run through. Note the additional grooves at the bottom of the holes to guide the rope. The carving is well-worn with larger parts of top ivory layer flaking off as if to illustrate the intensive use by an Inuk hunter in various weathering conditions. Beyond the aesthetic beauty of this realistic carving of a startled seal, the imagery certainly would have held spiritual significance to ensure successful seal-hunting.

Peter Loovers, February 2022

[1] Lincoln, Amber. 2020. The Art of Resilience. In Arctic: Culture and Climate. Amber Lincoln, Jago Cooper, and Jan Peter Laurens Loovers (Eds.). Pp. 280-295. London: Thames & Hudson in collaboration with The British Museum. P. 288

[2] Edward William Nelson, The Eskimo about Bering Strait, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1900), p. 130, 171-173

[3] Fitzhugh, William. 1982. Inua: Spirit World of the Bering Sea Eskimo. Washington, D.C. : Published for the National Museum of Natural History by the Smithsonian Institution Press. P. 62

[4] John Murdoch, 'Ethnological Results of the Point Barrow Expedition'. In Ninth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution 1887-'88, ed. by John W. Powell, (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1892), (Pp. 1-441), p.139

[5] Ibid, p.138

[6] See an example of toggle with an animal head, Rousselot, Jean-Loup, William W. Fitzhugh and Aron Crowell. 1988. Maritime Economies of the North Pacific Rim. In Crossroads of Continents: Cultures of Siberia and Alaska. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press. P. 162

Provenance

Accessioned into the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia circa 1994.
