



Head

On display

Title/Description: Head

Object Type: Animal, Figure

Materials: Walrus ivory

Measurements: h. 76 x w. 52 x d. 42 mm

Accession Number: 665

Historic Period: Old Bering Sea I (200 BC-AD 100)

Production Place: Bering Sea, North America, The Americas

Credit Line: Purchased with support from Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1976

During the course of this [the last] century a number of ancient walrus ivory sculptures from St Lawrence Island and adjacent islands in the Bering Sea have come to light, the result of both scientific and uncontrolled excavations. Pioneering research in the area by Collins (1929,1939) has led to the identification of several phases in the prehistoric period, which are succinctly outlined and illustrated by Wardwell (1986).

Foremost among the distinctive and beautiful sculptures from the earliest phase (Old Bering Sea I, also known as Okvik) are walrus ivory figurines, of which this is a complete and fine example. A number of figures in this style were found at a site called Okvik on one of the Penuk islets, off the south-east coast of St Lawrence Island, a name which Rainey (1941:46) translates as the 'place where many walrus haul up'. Okvik ivories are very often a rich brown or black colour, possibly the result of age and prolonged contact with organic material.

The significance and function of these prehistoric figurines is not known, though historic carvings of heads and torsos are usually interpreted as spirit images used in shamanic rituals, or as dolls with no specific ritual importance. The former attribution is more likely in the case of these figurines, since in this pre-metal culture considerable time and expertise would have been required to make them with flint and slate tools.

This deep brown walrus ivory head is almost certainly from a figure similar to RLS 1. This is more weathered and the features are not so finely finished, but the eyebrows are clearly marked. It was carved from the wide base of the tusk; two pieces of the outer ivory have split away from the tusk core and have been glued back by a former owner.

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. 224.

Provenance

Purchased by the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia from K. J. Hewett in 1976 out of funds provided by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury.
