



Walrus mask

On display

Title/Description: Walrus mask

Object Type: Mask

Materials: Hair, Wood

Measurements: h. 213 x w. 180 x d. 50 mm

Accession Number: 685

Historic Period: Late 19th century

Production Place: Alaska, North America, Norton Sound, The Americas

Credit Line: Purchased with support from Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1977

This thin mask has pegged teeth common to masks from the St Michael area of Norton Sound. The two longer teeth from the upper jaw, with the slanting nostrils, suggests a walrus is intended, although the two pegs holding the whiskers are positioned below the corners of the mouth, the usual place for men's lip plugs (labrets), thus emphasising the dual human and animal identity of many Alaskan masks.

The mask may have been used in dances during the Bladder Festival, which was 'celebrated to ensure success in hunting [and was a] memorial service for all food animals that had been killed the previous year' (Ray, 1967:37). Animal bladders, considered to be the location of the soul, were inflated for use in rituals at the festival. Masks worn in the St Michael festivals 'displayed not only the spirit of a bird or animal represented in the dance, but also the likeness of a dancer's guardian spirit' (*ibid.*: 38).

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. 251.

Provenance

Purchased by the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia from K. J. Hewett in 1977 out of funds provided by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury.
