



Spruce root basket with seal decoration

On display

Title/Description: Spruce root basket with seal decoration

Object Type: Basket

Materials: Seal skin thread, Walrus ivory, Willow or Spruce root

Technique: engraving, Sewing, Weaving

Measurements: h. 244 mm

Accession Number: 696a

Historic Period: Before 1918

Production Place: Alaska, North America, Seward Peninsula, The Americas

Cultural Group: Iñupiat

Credit Line: Acquired with support from the Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Art Trust, 1978

Inuit women have used two techniques - twined or coiled - for grass or root basketry making. [1] The twined baskets are thought to be the oldest. This is an exceptionally rare example of an Inupiaq single-rod coiled willow (or spruce root) basket and lid with walrus ivory figurines of eight seal and six seal heads attached. There is also a beautifully decorated ivory handle with an ivory seal figure looking upwards as if startled by something.

The seal skin thread that would have connected the basket with the handle has been deteriorated, leaving the handle and basket separated. On the bottom of the darker coloured walrus ivory handle are engravings of four caribou - although one is barely visible in the left corner with the drilled hole, thread made from seal skin, and black twine that appears to be added on at a later stage to repair the rotten thread - and another animal (perhaps a wolf). On the side are five + marks and one - mark, which might indicate the maker of this exquisite basket. The handle is characteristic of the more well-known elaborated scrimshaw bow-drills that Inupiat men started to make at the turn of the 20th Century for sale, with Angowhwazhuk ("Happy Jack") being widely regarded as the initiator and Master in the Art. [2] The drawings on walrus tusks, bows or handles, however, was already practised much earlier. [3]

Dorothy Jean Ray, an established anthropologist who has written extensively on Inuit and Unganan Art, provides more clues about this particular Bering Strait coiled basket. [4] She refers to this basket and writes that she acquired a similar but smaller coiled grass basket with only four seal ivory figurines from a family who had bought in Nome, in 1902, during the gold rush. This basket would therefore have been made for sale to gold diggers or other visitors that had flocked to Nome in search for immeasurable wealth. The ivory figurines might have been added as a commission for an individual or to accommodate an increasing interest in ivory figurines by outsiders. Another explanation might be that this basket was initially used for ceremonial purposes, but sold as Inupiat tried to cope with the decimation afflicted on their land due to the intensive resource extraction and colonial practices by outsiders.

The basket, too, is exemplary of Inupiaq coiled basketry pre-1918 influenza. [5] After the 1918 influenza, which caused havoc and death across Arctic Indigenous communities, the once revered boiled basket-making by Inupiaq women became replaced by baleen basket-making by Inupiaq men. The tradition of coiled grass basket-making, instead, was continued by Yupiit women who have become renowned for their intricate designs. More recently, however, Inupiaq women have begun weaving coiled willow or spruce root baskets again in private settings. [6]

Peter Loovers, January 2022

[1] Susan W. Fair, *Alaska Native Arts and Crafts* (Anchorage: Alaska Geographic Society, 1985), p.72

[2] Dorothy Jean Ray, *Artists of the Tundra and the Sea* (Seattle: University of Washinton Press, 1961), p. 3-10

[3] Dorothy Jean Ray, *The Eskimos of Bering Strait, 1650-1898* (Seattle: University of Washinton Press, 1975), p. 79

[4] Dorothy Jean, Ray, *A Legacy of Arctic Art*. (Seattle: Published for the University of Alaska

Museum by the University of Washington Press, 1996). P. 54

[5] Dorothy Jean, Ray, *A Legacy of Arctic Art*. (Seattle: Published for the University of Alaska Museum by the University of Washington Press, 1996). P. 53

[6] Molly Lee, *Baleen Basketry of the North Alaskan Eskimo*. (Barrow: North Slope Borough Planning Department, 1983).

Provenance

Acquired by the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia from K. J. Hewett in 1978 as a gift from the Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Art Trust.
