



Trap stick

Not on display

Title/Description: Trap stick

Object Type: Stick

Materials: Whalebone

Measurements: h. 267 x w. 20 x d. 60 mm

Accession Number: 726

Historic Period: 18th/early 19th century

Production Place: North America, Northwest Coast, The Americas

Cultural Group: Tlingit

Credit Line: Purchased with support from Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1980

Although these implements are referred to widely as 'trap sticks', their exact function is not known. Some examples in the American Museum of Natural History in New York have marmot snares attached to them, but, as Holm (1983:90) observes in his description of a comparable piece, their 'very specific and uniform shape implies a much more complex function than a tethering pin'. In many examples the lower part shows signs of abrasion or chewing, which suggests their role as part of a trap mechanism.

The carved finials on trap sticks frequently depict an animal on the back of a human figure, an arrangement which probably has sexual connotations and is also found in other contexts (see Maurer, 1977:290). This imagery may also be seen as the reverse of the usual hunting procedure, and was possibly connected with a mythic episode, reference to which made the trap more effective, since, in hunting as in all things, mere technical efficiency would not alone guarantee success. Here the human figure, with prominent rib-cage, has slender folded legs. The animal resembles a bear, though it has a long tail. The piece has the appearance of great antiquity, consistent with the fact that metal traps quickly superseded local methods in the early nineteenth century.

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. 270.

TO-BE-REPLACED-WITH-A-GAP

Though recorded as a 'trapstick' for use with a snare, this intricately carved piece of whalebone was a key part of a shaman's equipment. Worn tangled in their long dreadlocks and incised with spirit figures, it was important in the ceremonies summoning and communicating with spirits, providing a catalyst for the passing of information between the physical world and that of the supernatural.

Exhibitions

'Empowering Art: Indigenous Creativity and Activism from North America's Northwest Coast',
Sainsbury Centre, Norwich, 12/3/23 - 30/7/23

Provenance

Purchased by the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia from Arbutus Limited on the advice of Robert Sainsbury in 1980 out of income from the Sainsbury Purchasing Fund.
