



Mask

On display

Title/Description: Mask

Object Type: Mask

Materials: Wood

Measurements: h. 260 x w. 202 x d. 450 mm

Accession Number: 862

Historic Period: Late 19th century

Production Place: Alaska, Lower Yukon, North America, The Americas

Credit Line: Purchased with support from the Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Art Trust, 1983

This striking mask is carved with concentric ridges and grooves around a central aperture and has two slits for eyes. The inside is concave and smooth, except where the aperture is encircled by a

single shallow groove. Two holes are pierced on each side for a headstrap; there are three further holes around the top for feathers, now lost.

Fitzhugh and Kaplan observe (1982:201-2) that circular grooves, hoops and feather attachments frequently appear on Alaskan Inuit masks and other objects (see object 893). They cite iconographic parallels with circular constructions erected in the ceremonial house, symbolic of the heavens, and they also suggest a relationship between circular devices and the encircling of the human face by the parkahood, defining its special identity and its relationship to the surrounding world.

Two similar examples of this rare form of mask, complete with feathers, were collected by Nelson at Rasboinsky on the Lower Yukon in 1879 (Collins *et al.*, 1973:110; Fitzhugh and Kaplan, 1982: fig. 258). Nelson stated that they represented a *tunghak*, a powerful spirit and mythical 'keeper of the game who controlled the supply of game. These were probably shamans' masks, worn during winter festivals in the ceremonial house. When in use it is likely that fur strips or tassels hung from the central 'mouth'.

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) pp. 250-251.

Provenance

According to the vendor Jonathan Holstein, the object was collected in the 1960s by Lawrence Irving, an Arctic biologist, at Pilot village, Takshak area.

Purchased by the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia from Jonathan Holstein, New York, on the advice of Robert Sainsbury in 1983 out of funds provided by the Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Art Trust.
