



Hunting or ceremonial hat ornament

On display

Title/Description: Hunting or ceremonial hat ornament

Object Type: Ornament

Materials: Walrus ivory

Technique: Carving, Drilling, engraving

Measurements: h. 137 mm

Accession Number: 1122

Historic Period: early Old Bering Sea (AD 500-750)

Production Place: Alaska, Bering Sea, North America, The Americas

Cultural Group: Old Bering Sea

Credit Line: Purchased with support from the Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Charitable Trust, 1996

This astonishing walrus ivory engraving encapsulates Old Bering Sea spiritual understandings. Allegedly a hat ornament, the object comprises of two faces; one in the middle and one on the edge. The centre mask-like face has protuberant eyelids with drilled eyes that would have had ivory or something else set inside. The distinctive mouth is grinning or smiling with human-like teeth carved into the mouth. The characteristic early Old Bering Sea circle-dot motif with double lined “wings” forming the nose. Below the mask-like face is a zoomorphic being that might be a polar bear with the mouth containing sharp teeth, the ears and the plugs that function as eyes would have also had ivory (or jet) inlets. The top might be the tail of a sea-mammal, likely seal or perhaps whale.

Engravings that embody seals and bears are commonly found in Old Bering Sea materials. [1] Objects with multiple faces, like this one, have been understood as underscoring transformations between humans and animals. [2] Across the Arctic, the polar bear is highly revered and considered a powerful, sentient being. Contemporary St. Lawrence Island Yupiit, in similar vein, have honoured and respected bears. Or as St Lawrence Island Yupik artist Susie Silook explains: “They said that when they cut up a polar bear, it’s just like a man on the inside. The bones and everything. They respected it because it’s a hunter just like we are, you know. That is why it’s so honoured”. [3]

We could imagine that Old Bering Sea hunters had come to similar anatomical perspectives. Much like contemporary Inuit and other Indigenous Peoples, the Old Bering Sea peoples would have considered that every living creature or material possessed an *inua* which would take human forms. [4] This hat ornament (?), then, with the centred human face might also exemplify the *inua* (spirit or ‘its person’ in Yupiit) of the polar bear. [5] As Susie Silook points out, polar bears have been highly regarded for their hunting skills. The hat with this ornament might have been worn by a hunter during seals or other sea-mammals or worn by an *anjatquq* (spiritual leader) to mediate a temporal transformation into a bear.

Peter Loovers, February 2022

[1] Owen K. Mason, 'Art, Power, and Cosmos in Bering Strait Prehistory', in *Gifts from the Ancestors: Ancient Ivories of the Bering Strait*, ed. by William W. Fitzhugh, Julie Hollowell, and Aron L. Crowell (Princeton: Princeton University Art Museum, 2009), pp.112-125 (p. 115).

[2] *Ibid*, p. 114

[3] Susie Silook cited in Aron L. Crowell, 'Sea Mammals in Art, Ceremony, and Belief: Knowledge Shared by Yupik and Iñupiaq Elders', in *Gifts from the Ancestors: Ancient Ivories of the Bering Strait*, ed. by William W. Fitzhugh, Julie Hollowell, and Aron L. Crowell (Princeton: Princeton University Art Museum, 2009), pp.206-225 (p. 212).

[4] William W. Fitzhugh and Susan A. Kaplan, *Inua: Spirit World of the Bering Sea Eskimo*, (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, 1983), p. 6.; William W. Fitzhugh, 'Eagles, Beasts, and Gods: Art of the Old Bering Sea Hunting Complex', in *Gifts from the Ancestors: Ancient Ivories of the Bering Strait*, ed. by William W. Fitzhugh, Julie Hollowell, and Aron L. Crowell (Princeton: Princeton University Art Museum, 2009), pp.162-189 (p. 185).

[5] Aron L. Crowell, 'Sea Mammals in Art, Ceremony, and Belief: Knowledge Shared by Yupik and Iñupiaq Elders', in *Gifts from the Ancestors: Ancient Ivories of the Bering Strait*, ed. by William W. Fitzhugh, Julie Hollowell, and Aron L. Crowell (Princeton: Princeton University Art Museum, 2009), pp.206-225 (p. 212-215).

Provenance

Purchased by the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia from Miriam Shiell in 1996 on the advice of Robert Sainsbury out of funds provided by the Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Charitable Trust.
