



Hunting amulet in the form of a seal

On display

Title/Description: Hunting amulet in the form of a seal

Object Type: Animal, Figure

Materials: Ivory (?), Pyrite

Technique: Carving, Drilling, engraving

Measurements: h. 203 mm

Accession Number: 1132

Historic Period: Punuk (800-1200 AD) or Thule (1200-1800)

Production Place: Alaska, North America, Northeast Cape, St. Lawrence Island (?), The Americas

Cultural Group: Punuk or Thule

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

A seal (perhaps a spotted seal?) basks in the sun, the tail slightly upwards. The curved lines and smaller lines with dotted ends are characteristic of Punuk style, although it has been suggested that it perhaps has been made by Thule (1200-1800 AD). [1] The Punuk carvings (800-1200 AD) distinguished themselves from OBS (500-1200 AD) carvings in a shift of more realistic animal carvings such as this seal. [2] The seal carving was found at Cape Kialegak - Kiyalighaq or Kialighaq [3] - on the south-eastern point of Sivugaq (St Lawrence Island) near to the Punuk Islands.

Julie Hollowell provides fascinating information about this object: "The net-like pattern of engraved lines may indicate its use as a hunting amulet, the pyrite inlays were apparently added by a dealer. A video taken when this piece was found was sent to a potential East Coast buyer, showing the artefact being turned around in the digger's hands - without the pyrite inlays". [4]

The dealer's creative alterations to add value to the object also illustrates a wider perception of ancient Arctic Indigenous Peoples' walrus ivory carvings as valuable art objects rather than (spiritual) belongings such as a hunting amulet like this seal might have been. The distinction between art and artefact is an important one to make in the global art scenery. [5] Dealers and collectors have an important role in shaping the designation of something as art and therefore augment particular economic value to a carving. [6] In this particular case, the dealer's addition of pyrite underscores how belongings transform into a commodity.

The addition of other materials to a belonging is not unusual and certainly Arctic ancestors would have done so. But pyrite certainly was not one of them. Punuk peoples would have plugged the holes with feather quill, dark seaweed fibre or soot. Engraved lines were probably also coloured with soot or red ochre. [7] These additions, however, were most probably not to increase an economic value but rather to incorporate spiritual strengths and ensure hunting successes. In this case, this carving of a seal might have ensured luck in seal hunting.

Peter Loovers, February 2022

[1] Julie Hollowell, 'Ancient Ivories in a Global World' in *Gifts from the Ancestors: Ancient Ivories of Bering Strait*, ed. by William W. Fitzhugh, Julie Hollowell and Aron L. Cromwell, Strait (Princeton: Princeton University Art Museum, 2009), pp. 252-289, (p.276).

[2] For dating, see Owen K. Mason 'Focusing on the Coast'. In *Arctic: culture and climate*, ed. by Amber Lincoln, Jago Cooper, and Jan Peter Laurens Loovers, (London: Thames & Hudson in collaboration with The British Museum, 2020), Pp. 187-196.

[3] Crowell, Aron L. and Estelle Oozevaseuk. 2006. The St. Lawrence Island Famine and Epidemic, 1879-80: A Yupik Narrative in Cultural and Historical Context. *Arctic Anthropology*, 43(1): pp. 1-19. p. 6, 8.

[4] Julie Hollowell, 'Ancient Ivories in a Global World' in *Gifts from the Ancestors: Ancient Ivories of*

Bering Strait, ed. by William W. Fitzhugh, Julie Hollowell and Aron L. Cromwell, (Princeton: Princeton University Art Museum, 2009), pp. 252-289, (p.276).

[5] Julie Hollowell, 'A History of "Ancient Eskimo Ivories" as Art', in *Aspects of Okvik: Four Essays on Things of Bering Strait*, ed. by Don E. Durmond, (Eugene: University of Oregon, 2008), pp. 222-259.

[6] Julie Hollowell, 'A History of "Ancient Eskimo Ivories" as Art', in *Aspects of Okvik: Four Essays on Things of Bering Strait*, ed. by Don E. Durmond, (Eugene: University of Oregon, 2008), pp. 222-259, (p.227-)

[7] 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, 2009a), pp.162-189 (p. 173); see also Julie Hollowell, 'Ancient Ivories in a Global World' in *Gifts from the Ancestors: Ancient Ivories of Bering Strait*, ed. by William Fitzhugh, Aron L. Cromwell, and Julie Hollowell, Strait (Princeton: Princeton University Art Museum, 2009), pp. 252-289, (p.276); Feng Qu, *The Legacy of Shamans? Structural and Cognitive Perspectives of Prehistoric Symbolism in the Bering Strait Region*, PhD Thesis, (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Fairbanks, 2013).

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.
