



Gaming piece

On display

Title/Description: Gaming piece

Born: 1700 - 1799

Object Type: game

Materials: Mammal tooth

Measurements: h. 48 mm

Accession Number: 118

Historic Period: 18th century or earlier

Production Place: Arctic, North America, The Americas

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

Images of swimming birds, some with human faces, have been found from the Bering Sea to Greenland, and date from prehistoric times to the nineteenth century. They are reported to have been used as toys, shamanic amulets and gaming dice. Referring to examples from northern Canada, Boas (1888: 567) noted: 'A game similar to dice, called tingmiujang -i.e. images of birds - is frequently played. A set of about fifteen figures ... belongs to this game; some representing birds, others men and women ... the figures are shaken in the hand and thrown upward. On falling, some stand upright, others lie flat on the back or on the side. Those standing upright belong to that player whom they face... The players throw by turns until the last figure is taken up, the one getting the greatest number of figures being the winner.'

This specimen is carved from mammal teeth, possibly walrus (not tusk), and is pierced at the back. This image is a rare form in which the head of the bird becomes a human carrying a child on its back.

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. 239.

Provenance

Gift from K. J. Hewett to Robert and Lisa Sainsbury in 1960.

Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.
