



Bowl in beaver form

Not on display

Title/Description: Bowl in beaver form

Born: 1750 - 1850

Object Type: Bowl

Materials: Wood

Measurements: l. 229 x w. 229 x d. 110 mm

Accession Number: 123

Historic Period: Late 18th/early 19th century

Production Place: North America, Northwest Coast, The Americas

Cultural Group: Tlingit

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

Although this fine bowl has no surface engraving, the eyes, ears and general form suggest a northern Northwest Coast attribution. Bill Holm (personal communication, 1985) considers it to be Tlingit and early nineteenth century at the latest. The naturalism is unusual, but beavers were more often depicted naturalistically than other species. Here, the large incisors, forepaws gripping the stick, and the broad, thick tail show beaver in a typical pose.

The wood (probably alder) is completely blackened and saturated with oil, suggesting a long period of use. Such bowls were used at feasts to serve fish oil or seal oil, which was eaten with dried salmon and other delicacies. Fish oil was extracted, by boiling, from the candlefish or olachen (see Krause, 1956:122,130) and preserved in wooden chests.

Large quantities of oil were accumulated, and then either consumed or distributed at potlatch feasts. One of the main routes to eminence in northern Northwest Coast societies was through public demonstrations of abundance and control over valued resources. Food and crest artworks were material manifestations of such abundance, and the potlatch was the occasion when this wealth was displayed, consumed or given away (see Rosman and Rubel, 1971; de Laguna, 1972:606-51, and Jonaitis, 1986: 42-50, for an assessment of the potlatch, a large-scale gathering linked to mortuary rites which involved feasting, singing, dance entertainment and distributions of food and property). A man could gain great prestige by hosting a potlatch and demonstrating publicly his ability to

mobilise large quantities of food and goods. By doing so he honoured the dead in an appropriate manner, repaid groups who had contributed to earlier funeral rites, and also validated the status of his family or clan. Such munificence did not lead to impoverishment, for a donor would soon be a recipient on another occasion.

Some of the finest sculptures from the Northwest Coast are bowls in which the body of a human or animal becomes the vessel. Sturtevant *et al.* (1974) illustrate many fine examples in the Smithsonian Institution. The animal crests with which they are decorated relate to the original owner for whom they were carved, although bowls could themselves be distributed as valuables. The walls of this bowl are thin and there are two holes in the flat rim, probably for a suspension cord. There is an old paper label on the base with the number 845 in black ink.

Steven Hooper, 1997

(Entry taken from *Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection catalogue, Vol. 2: Pacific, African and Native North American Art*, edited by Steven Hooper, Yale University Press, 1997).

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 Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from K. J. Hewett in 1966.

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