



# Dagger

---

**Not on display**

**Title/Description:** Dagger

**Born:** 1800 - 1950

**Object Type:** Dagger

**Materials:** Human bone, Quill

**Measurements:** l. 394 x h. 50 x d. 48 mm

**Accession Number:** 169

**Historic Period:** 19th century, 20th Century - Early

**Production Place:** Middle Sepik River, New Guinea, Oceania, Pacific

**Cultural Group:** Washkuk

**Credit Line:** Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

---

This human bone, also referred to as a dagger in Washkuk society, was collected in the 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> century. When someone owned an object such as this in the community, people believed that they gained the ability to perform magic. One type of magic that they may perform is that they may be able to disappear so that people cannot see them and they can go wherever they want to when they use it.

People from Washkuk may suggest or believe that the dead person is with the artist who carves and owns his bone. It's like travelling with a spirit through the air and seeing a different world. It also allows him to know the dead person's language and communicate with them, or we say that he may be able to see the spiritual world which other people in the village cannot see. The skill with which the artist sculpted such designs and patterns onto the human bone gave him a special power that may enable him to perform magic.

Pax Jakupa, February 2023

TO-BE-REPLACED-WITH-A-GAP

This dagger closely resembles an example collected among the Washkuk in 1971 (Giiell and Rusifiol, 1976: 55), and two others collected in Palimbei, Iatmul territory, in 1913 and 1927 (Kelm, 1966: I: 460-61). However, Anthony Forge has confirmed (personal communication) a Washkuk origin for this example.

In the Middle Sepik area certain bones, enshrining the potency and spiritual power of the deceased,

were preserved after death; skulls were embellished with painted clay features and hair, while the shin bone (tibia) was sometimes made into a dagger, as here.

Although this example has lost its decorative pendants of feathers and shells, which were once attached to the quill which passes through the two holes in the top, it has acquired a beautiful dark honey-coloured patina, enhancing the designs which extend all around the surface of the handle.

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. 54.

---

---

---

## **Provenance**

Acquired by the Sainsbury Family in 1972. Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.

---