



Toggling harpoon head

On display

Title/Description: Toggling harpoon head

Object Type: harpoon

Materials: Antler, Leather, Sinew, Walrus ivory, Wood

Measurements: l. 28 x w. 343 mm

Accession Number: 664a

Historic Period: 19th century

Production Place: Alaska, North America, The Americas

Credit Line: Purchased with support from Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1976

This is a complete assembly for a toggling harpoon, lacking only the point. It is composed of a long walrus ivory socketpiece into which is socketed a plain antler foreshaft, which in turn is fitted into a barbed antler head (lacking the metal or slate point).

The toggling harpoon was a sophisticated weapon developed by the Inuit for sea mammal hunting. The socketpiece (formerly fixed to a wooden shaft) lent weight to the impact of the harpoon, while the slim foreshaft (secured to the line by a thong through its central aperture) assisted deep penetration into the seal, walrus or beluga (white whale). Once struck, the animal's throes disengaged the harpoon and foreshaft from the barbed head, which remained firm in the wound. The head was attached by a strong line to an inflated sealskin float, which tired the animal when it attempted to dive and escape. Toggling harpoons of this kind were used for spring hunting from kayaks in the offshore broken ice. A throwing board was employed to provide extra impetus, acting like an extension to the hunter's arm. In the shallower waters off south-west Alaska smaller mammals like seal and walrus were more important than whales, which kept out to sea and were taken more frequently around the Bering Straits and along the north Alaskan shore (see Fitzhugh and Kaplan, 1982: 67-84 for further details).

The animal socketpiece on this example is very similar to an example collected by Nelson on the lower Kuskokwim river between 1877 and 1881 (1899: pl. liv, 8), which he describes as the conventionalised form of a wolf. Wolves occur frequently in the mythology and iconography of the Kuskokwim area, and Fitzhugh and Kaplan (1982: 69) observe that 'socketpieces often display land or sea predators whose cunningness is engaged spiritually to enhance the hunter's success.'

Small wood plugs are set into the wolf's eyes, nostrils, shoulders and hips. A tiny ivory disc remains in the right eye. A former owner has glued the foreshaft into the head, no doubt to prevent its loss.

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. 243.

Provenance

Formerly in the collection of Harry Beasley.

Purchased by the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia from K. J. Hewett in 1976 out of funds provided by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury.
