



Figure

On display

Title/Description: Figure

Object Type: Figure

Materials: Wood

Measurements: h. 286 x w. 80 x d. 45 mm

Accession Number: 879

Historic Period: Old Bering Sea I (200 BC-AD 100)

Production Place: Bering Sea, North America, The Americas

Credit Line: Purchased with support from the Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Art Trust, 1984

Rainey (1941: fig. 28, 7) illustrates a comparable wood image which was excavated at the Ovik site on the Punak Islands. The completely plain treatment of the body suggested that such figures were originally clothes, as were many nineteenth-century Alaskan images. The arched lines across the brow, possibly indicating age or tattoos, also appear on a mask found on St Lawrence Islands in the 1880s (Fitzhugh and Kaplan, 1982: 228).

This example has been crushed and bent at the neck, and a vertical break down the centre has been repaired by a previous owner. Whether the curve in the figure is intentional (perhaps in imitation of walrus ivory images), or whether it is the result of having been crushed for a long period, is not clear.

Wooden items are currently rarer than ivory ones, though excavations, both controlled and otherwise, in frozen house foundations have uncovered many wood objects in a good state of preservation. Trees do not grow on the Bering Sea coast and islands, but logs of spruce, birch and poplar are carried down the main Alaskan rivers into the Bering Sea from the forested interior during the summer thaw. This driftwood provided the coastal and island Inuit with valuable timber for boats, houses and ritual equipment such as masks and figures.

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. 226.

Provenance

Purchased by the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia from Jonthan Holstein, New York, on the advice of Robert Sainsbury in 1984 out of funds provided by the Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Art Trust.
