



# Powder flask

---

**Not on display**

**Title/Description:** Powder flask

**Object Type:** Vessel

**Materials:** Metal, Shell, Sinew, Wood

**Measurements:** h. 135 x w. 302 x d. 90 mm

**Accession Number:** 916

**Historic Period:** 19th century

**Production Place:** Alaska, North America, The Americas

**Credit Line:** Purchased with support from the Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Art Trust, 1985

---

Firearms were introduced to Alaska from Asia during the early nineteenth century, and in due course the percussion mechanism superseded the flintlock. The Inuit developed their own accessories in the form of powder flasks, percussion cap cases, bullet moulds, etc. (see Fitzhugh and Kaplan, 1982: 167).

Nelson collected a fine powder flask from Cape Vancouver in the form of a puffin's head, but this example surpasses even that in sculptural expression, suggesting as it does the dying throes of a stricken animal, probably a seal. The eyes are shell discs with bead pupils, and the flask is plugged with a cartridge case from a rifle bullet, which has traces of gunpowder inside and was used as a measure. Two small boxes with sliding lids (shown slightly open in the illustration) are incorporated into the block beneath the sculpture; these were for storing percussion caps or bullets (see VanStone, 1976: pls. 10, 25 for similar equipment). Traces of red paint remain around the animal's deeply chiselled mouth and the neck of the flask.

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. 244.

---

---

---

## **Provenance**

Purchased by the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia from K. J. Hewett on the advice of Robert Sainsbury in 1985 out of funds provided by the Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Art Trust.

---