



Sea otters charm fastener for hunting hat

On display

Title/Description: Sea otters charm fastener for hunting hat

Born: 1800 c.

Object Type: Figure

Materials: Walrus ivory

Technique: Carving, Drilling

Measurements: h. 114 mm

Accession Number: 1060

Production Place: North America, Southwestern Alaska, The Americas, USA

Cultural Group: Unganax (Aleut) or Sugpiaq (Aluttiq)

Credit Line: Purchased with support from the Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Art Trust, 1992

Ivory sea otter figurines made especially by Unganax (Aleut) carvers, and to a certain extent by Sugpiaq (Alutiiq) carvers, are abundant in museum collections across the globe in various shapes and styles. [1] Most of these would have been hunting charms attached to *iqjax* or to visors or onto the *iqjax* or used as fasteners like this one might have been. Sea otters hold a prominent role in UNGan and Sugpiaq lives. According to Unganax oral history, “an incestuous brother and sister, the children of good parents, became sea otters through the benevolent response of the deity to the parents’ prayers following the children's suicide (or murder and suicide), committed when the girl discovered that her sexual partner was her brother”. [2]

This intricate Unganax kayak fastener or ornament for *qayaatux^ux^* (hunting visor or hat), from around 1800, shows a sea otter mother with child both in the characteristic feeding position. [3] The line or thread would have run through the two holes between the legs and at the womb. Looking more closely, the mother figure appears to resemble the shape of an *iqjax* (qajaq/kayak) with the head shaped like the distinctive curved bow, the mother’s breast forming a pointed front deck and the mother’s paws being the distinctive stern. The sea otter’s child is placed in the location of the cockpit.

Unganax and Sugpiaq hunters have been renowned for their sea-faring skills and knowledge to navigate the turbulent waters of the Bering Sea and North Pacific Ocean whilst hunting sea otters and other animals. The otters gave themselves to those hunters who decorated their *iqjax* with ornaments and wore beautiful clothes and *qayaatux^ux^*. Within colonial history, sea otters have become synonymous with the encroachment of the imperial chartered Russian American Company and the decimation of both sea otters and the Unganax and Sugpiaq population. [4] At the end of the 1700s, numerous *promyshlenniki* (Russian and Indigenous traders) ventured to the Aleutian Islands to hunt sea otters for their highly valuable furs. Unganax hunters, whose exceptional skills were recognised by the Russian Empire [5], soon moved into a life of servitude where they had to meet quotas set by the Imperial regime. [6] After Russian America became Alaska, in 1867, the situation for the Unganax and Sugpiaq did not improve much and they faced subjugations to American laws and colonial practices. Perhaps the decimation of the sea otters and the Unganax and Sugpiaq might

explain why there are so many sea otter hunting charms and *qayaatux^ux^* in the collections of outsiders whether in museums or in private collections.

Peter Loovers, February 2022

[1] Black, Lydia, *Aleut Art = Unangam Aguqaadangin*. (Virginia Beach, VA: Donning Co. Publishers, 2003). P. 104

[2] Black, Lydia, *Animal World of the Aleuts*. *Arctic Anthropology*, 35(1998): Pp. 126-135. P. 131

[3] Dorothy Jean, *Aleut and Eskimo Art: Tradition and Innovation in South Alaska*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981)

[4] Larry Gedney, *The Aleut and the Otter*. *Alaska Science Forum*. (Fairbanks: University of Alaska, 1983), <https://www.gi.alaska.edu/alaska-science-forum/aleut-and-otter> [accessed 2 December 2020]; see also the impact of Russians from Unganax perspective, Ilarion Mercurieff, *Wisdom Keeper: One Man's Journey to Honor the Untold History of the Unangan People*. (Berkeley: North Atlantic Book, 2016).

[5] Margaret Lantis, 'Aleut'. In *Handbook of North American Indians: Arctic (Volume 5)*, ed. by David Damas (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1984)

[6] Jan Peter Laurens Loovers, 'Trade in the Bering Strait', in *Arctic: Culture and Climate*, ed. by Amber Lincoln, Jago Cooper, and Jan Peter Laurens Loovers (London: Thames & Hudson in collaboration with The British Museum, 2020). Pp. 242-254 (p.246)

Provenance

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