



Carved ivory human figure

On display

Title/Description: Carved ivory human figure

Object Type: Figure

Materials: Walrus or mammoth ivory

Technique: Carving

Accession Number: 469

Historic Period: Punuk culture (800-1200 AD) or Thule (1200-1800 AD)

Production Place: Alaska, North America, St. Lawrence Island (?), The Americas

Cultural Group: Punuk or Thule

This faceless and limbless figure, with a thinly outlined torso and something which might look like a hood, is either made from walrus or mammoth ivory. There is not any provenance on this figure but the Smithsonian Institution holds a somewhat similar figure and describes it as a game piece or a doll. [1] Sort-like wooden or ivory figurines have been found across Sivuqaq (St. Lawrence Island). [2] With some reservation, we can further assume that the figure was made on Sivuqaq by a carver from the Punuk (800=1200 AD) or Thule (1200-1800 AD) cultures.

These figures, called *qawawaaq* (carved ivory human figures) in the St Lawrence Yupik language, would have been carved by men for their daughters or female relatives. The girls would have had several of these figures to play unknown games in the sod houses. [3] Particularly during the long and cold winter nights, or during stormy weather, we could imagine fathers carving these figurines from the walrus they had hunted just like their predecessors might have done. [4] The girls would have been full of anticipation for them to finish. According to St. Lawrence Yupik elder Vera Kaneshiro, the widening base make these small figures easy to stand up compared to the larger wooden or ivory play dolls (*taghnughhaghwaaq*, in the St. Lawrence Yupik language) or the walrus ivory or wooden *alingtiiritaq* (amulet or household guardian). The latter would have been placed inside the house to ward off bad luck and malevolent spirits. Archaeologist Otto Geist, however, mentions that *qawawaaq* like this figurine, were used as household guardians rather than as toys. [5] Another alternative is that the *qawawaaq* were being used during storytelling. [6]

Although the ancestral carvers from Sivuaq were considered as crude and lacking artistic skills by some [7], this figurine like others from Sivuaq as elsewhere conveys its own story that is still not fully understood. The small scratches on the lower part and at the base of the figurine and the light shaping of the torso and faceless head are providing some clues to the care with which the figurine has been made. Perhaps this figurine held similar spiritual significance for Punuk or Thule ancestors as those by more contemporary Central Yupiit. Central Yupiit figurines and dolls were prohibited to go outside the house during winter until the appearance of the first geese marking the arrival of spring. [8] Whilst the exact purpose of these figurines remain unclear, we can assume that this figurine was equally held with great respect.

Peter Loovers, February 2022

[1] National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institute, catalogue number 262458. https://collections.si.edu/search/detail/edanmdm:NMAI_278610?q=thule&fq=name%3A%22Krummel%2C+Bernhard+U.%22&record=5&hlterm=thule [accessed 27 September 2021]

[2] Linn, Angela J. and Molly Lee. 2006. *Intimates and Effigies: Dolls and Human Figurines in Alaska Native Cultures*. In *Not Just a Pretty Face: Dolls and Human Figurines in Alaska Native Cultures* (2nd edition). Pp. 1-39. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press

[3] Alaska Native Collections. 2001. From discussion with Jacob Ahwinona, Estelle Oozevasuk, Marie Saclamana and Branson Tungiyon (Kawerak, Inc.) at the National Museum of Natural History and National Museum of the American Indian, 5/07/2001-5/11/2001. Also participating: Aron Crowell and Bill Fitzhugh (NMNH) and Suzi Jones (AMHA). <https://alaska.si.edu/record.asp?id=326> [accessed on 27 September 2021]

[4] Lincoln, Amber 2020. *Harnessing Weather in Hunting Livelihoods*. In *Arctic: Culture and Climate*. Amber Lincoln, Jago Cooper, and Jan Peter Laurens Loovers. Pp. 102-131. London: Thames & Hudson in collaboration with The British Museum.

[5] Linn, Angela J. and Molly Lee. 2006. *Intimates and Effigies: Dolls and Human Figurines in Alaska Native Cultures*. In *Not Just a Pretty Face: Dolls and Human Figurines in Alaska Native Cultures* (2nd edition). Pp. 1-39. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press. p.3

[6] Linn, Angela J. and Molly Lee. 2006. Intimates and Effigies: Dolls and Human Figurines in Alaska Native Cultures. In Not Just a Pretty Face: Dolls and Human Figurines in Alaska Native Cultures (2nd edition). Pp. 1-39. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press. P. 6

[7] Nelson, Edward W. 1900. The Eskimo about Bering Strait. Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution. P. 342

[8] Linn, Angela J. and Molly Lee. 2006. Intimates and Effigies: Dolls and Human Figurines in Alaska Native Cultures. In Not Just a Pretty Face: Dolls and Human Figurines in Alaska Native Cultures (2nd edition). Pp. 1-39. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press. P. 11

Provenance

Acquired by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from K. J. Hewett in 2000.

Accessioned into the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia circa 2000.
