

Straight Adze Handle

Chinookan, probably Multnomah, ca. 1750-1820

Lower Columbia River

Elk antler

6 14" High x 1 7/8" Wide x 3" Deep

Collected from Sauvies Island, Lower Columbia River, 1920s

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It is with the adze that the artisans of the Northwest Coast hewed their material life and culture from the towering forests of the region. The *straight adze*, as this type is known, is perhaps the oldest form of the tool. If the archaeological levels at the Ozette site in Washington are an indication, the straight adze predates the historically ubiquitous D-adze form by many centuries. A straight adze is in concept one leap above a chisel, providing an integral guard for the protection of the user's fingers and knuckles as well as additional weight that enhances the inertia of the tool as it is rhythmically swung in use. The straight adze in this format may have evolved with the artisan's adaptation to cutting blades of iron and steel, which were already in well-established use at the time of the first Euro-American arrivals in the area in the late 18th century. Bulkier carving blades of stone, such as jadeite or nephrite, would not fit well in this configuration. The blade of this adze would have been bound on the inner surface of the thin section directly below the human face, captured between the "feet" of this image that curve forward from the section that forms the knuckle guard on the opposite side of the tool.

No other straight adze known to exist has imbued this level of liveliness and character in its decorative images. The poignant spirit of the human face alone is remarkable, its lips pursed in a song offered to the adzer to assist in his long hours of tap-tap-tap-tapping work. The three-plane sculptural style of this face is seen in human representations from the Columbia River to southern British Columbia. The nose and cheeks of this face are highly polished, the result of the adzer lovingly rubbing those cheeks to wipe away the tears of sweat the spirit image bore on his behalf. Over each shoulder of the helping spirit, touched by its paws, the expressive face of a four-legged spirit-helper also looks to the adzer, lending him the strength and persistence that is nature to their kind. The power of these artfully rendered images clearly illustrates the level of expression that was once attained on the southern Northwest Coast, where so much was wiped away so soon by the onslaught of disease and displacement in the first decades of the 19th century. The Multnomah of Sauvies Island were particularly devastated by an outbreak of malaria in the early 1830s, after which their villages ceased to exist.