

WHALE-BONE D-ADZE

Quinault, c. 1750-1800

Whale bone, steel, brass, fiber (sinew) wrapping

c. 9" L x 4" H

This gracefully formed and deeply polished whale-bone adze appears to be one of the oldest still in existence, as well as one of the most beautifully made. It appears to significantly pre-date two related examples, each of which can be dated to around the mid-nineteenth century. Its grip is finely formed to lie comfortably in the user's hands, and the appended image appears perfectly and gracefully melded to the function of the tool. This humanoid image at the rear of the adze is said to be the canoemaker's helper, a spirit who inspires the carver to continue his long task without fatigue. The minimal piercing of this image, along with the fullness of each of its parts (arms, legs, neck, and torso), suggest that it was created with archaic tools by a labor-intensive process. The surface of the bone shows evidence of continued scraping, by a tool with an imperfectly honed edge, like a shard of iron, steel, or even a stone tool. The hard material and unsophisticated tools, combined with the vision and patience of the maker, nonetheless came together to produce a human form of uncommon strength and detail.

The whale-bone itself is an exceptional piece of material (probably from a jawbone), almost completely lacking the porous inner portion commonly seen in whale-bone articles like clubs, bark shredders, and other adze handles. The current blade was evidently made by a very skilled and inventive metalworker. The fine form of the steel, cut down from a double-bitted axe, is further enhanced by the very skillful addition of a brass bolster that encloses and protects the sinew wrappings. The brass piece was carefully fitted and riveted to the steel section, and then filed to match exactly the outer form of the steel. Wear patterns on the whale-bone handle indicate that this is not the original blade, though it is clearly very old. It may be only the last of an unknown number of successive blades, some of which may have been of stone.

The D-shaped hand-adze is a development of the southern Northwest Coast carving tradition and functions beautifully as an extension of the artist's hand. Held with the blade facing the carver (in the opposite direction from that of the thumb), the adze is used both as a planing tool and for making deep sculptural intrusions into a wooden form. This adze style was used from southwest Washington to roughly the north end of Vancouver Island and the adjacent mainland of British Columbia. North of the region, the elbow-adze was the exclusively preferred tool type.

Evidence from the Ozette archaeological site on the upper coast of Washington State suggests that the D-adze is a comparatively late development in the Native tool catalog. The earliest levels of occupation excavated at Ozette (which were covered by a huge mudslide 300-500 years ago) contained only straight-adzes, while D-adzes were found

of the lower Columbia River. These have been made from both elk antler and whale-bone. Exactly where the D-adze form was first created is not known, but historic evidence shows that the form was in use over a wide area in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Cook (in 1778) and other early explorers collected examples of D-adzes from the Nootka Sound area (see wooden D-adze at Royal Albert Museum, Exeter, England [#E 1232], Kaeppler, 1978), indicating that the D-adze type was well established before Euro-American contact.

Two other closely related D-adzes exist in museum collections; one at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard [#65509], and another at the Thaw Collection, Fenimore House Museum, NYSHA (New York State Historical Association, Cooperstown, NY [#T471]). The forms of these adzes, which both have Quinault connections, suggest that Quinault was also the origin of this adze. This tool, however, is clearly the oldest of the three. The Peabody adze was acquired by the museum in 1905, and was said to have been the property of Captain Mason, a Quinault leader and canoe carver (illustrated in Wright, 1991:fig. 60; and in *Soft Gold*, fig. 123, page 150). The Captain Mason adze, though a beautiful and delicately formed carving in its own right, shows several characteristics that strongly suggest that its form was derived from this example, rather than the other way around.

The spirit figure on the Captain Mason adze is more heavily pierced between the limbs, and the features of its face (such as the nose and eyelid forms) are more deeply and precisely carved. These characteristics suggest that the figure on that adze was carved with more technically advanced tools, such as steel knives that were able to cut away more of the bone between the arms and legs and around the neck. These tools would also be both strong and sharp enough to cut more deeply and cleanly into the bone surface of the face. The limbs of the figure, however, lack the more delicately flexed posture and muscular formation of those on the earlier adze, as well as the more subtle formation of the buttocks, hands/wrists, and shoulder blades thereon. The Captain Mason adze, though surface-polished from long use, does not exhibit either the same advanced degree of wear and polish, nor the more subtle and graceful (and also stronger) formation of the heel of the adze present on the older tool. Each of these indications implies that this tool was made by a true master, and used extensively over a very long period of time. The blade of the Captain Mason adze is a heavier and less skillfully shaped piece of axe steel, though it too has characteristics that appear to have been inspired by the beautiful and functional shape of the blade present on the earlier adze.

The NYSHA adze (illustrated on page 315 of the Thaw Collection catalog), includes the depiction of two humanoid images. One of these is positioned at the front of the adze (the blade end), its head facing the blade tip and its body very abstractly represented. The other is in essentially the same position as that of the two examples addressed above, indicating a common inspirational origin. The two humanoid faces are rendered

in a typical Coast Salish sculptural style, closely related to wooden figures and images collected from among the Quinault. (This adze has no historical documentation, but the stylistic evidence and related appearance to the previous examples readily suggests the Quinault origin). The addition of a second image on this adze suggests that it was not an actual copy of the earlier tool, but may have been made for a related family line. The comparatively square-ish form, extensive piercing, and less expressive human image put it in a visually different class than the subject example, and suggest a later date of manufacture. The NYSHA adze shows little of the wear and polish indicative of long use, and probably dates from around the middle of the nineteenth century.

The similarity of both these related adzes, though each lacks the design sophistication of the earlier tool, indicates the apparently venerated status and respect that must have been accorded to their predecessor. Made for or by a master canoemaker, and passed down through the hands of successive generations of Quinault artists, the adze probably gained the stature of a well-known and respected relic that possessed the spirit and inherited skills of all its previous owners. Without knowing its full history, and precisely when it may have left Quinault ownership, it's possible to hypothesize that the Captain Mason adze may have been made as a replacement for the family that owned the older tool. It seems unlikely that such a close copy of a respected object would have been made as long as the old tool survived within the originating culture. It may be that the original was given to a respected friend or leader from outside the Quinault area, and a replacement was made to be maintained within the descending family. The Captain Mason adze was evidently collected not very long before its gifting to the museum (in 1905), since the provenance information survived with it. Acquired perhaps around the turn of the century, it may have been in use for about 50 years. Unfortunately for us, exactly how each of these striking and important tools made their way to their present locations remains largely shrouded in the unknown past.