



Bone Wand

Chinookan, c. pre-contact

9 ½" Tall

Donald Ellis Gallery

Some of the most elegantly simple and beautiful sculptures from the Northwest Coast originated on the lower Columbia River, in the territory of the Chinookan-speaking peoples. These groups include the Chinook proper, the Cathlamet, the Multnomah, and others who lived below The Cascades of the Columbia, the current site of Bonneville Dam.

Comparatively little is known in depth of the origins and development of the Chinookan art style, though its clear relationship to Coast Salish and other southern Northwest Coast styles is apparent. Works from this area nonetheless have an intriguing, enigmatic, and remarkable uniqueness about them that places them securely in their own realm, readily distinguishable in most cases from their relations to the north. Historically, the Chinookan people suffered great deprivations as a result of Euro-American encroachments into their territory in the exploration period, beginning in the late eighteenth century. Smallpox, malaria, and other unfamiliar diseases took a huge toll on these cultures, causing the total demise of some. The Multnomah, essentially as a whole, succumbed to malaria in the 1830s, and any few survivors were taken in by neighboring tribes.

As a result, the cultural artifacts that remain from these peoples are primarily in the media of stone, bone, and antler, though a precious few wooden objects survive that have been collected throughout the historic period. This intriguing bone object, said to have been found east of Sauvies Island in the Columbia River, may have originated among the Multnomah, whose territories were in that region.

The true function of this artifact is not known, as its fragmentary state does little to describe its former purpose. It may have been the property of a shamanic practitioner, part of a staff or wand denoting such occupation, but such is mere conjecture, based primarily on its lack of similarity

with other more readily identifiable objects. It may be the finial of a handle of some variety of tool, but again conjecture prevails in this assumption. Regardless of its original purpose, the simple elegance of its form and embellishment has the power to draw one in, and to convey a remarkably strong vision of another world in another era, far beyond the boundaries of our own. Such is the beauty of 'primitive' art.

The well-defined but shallow relief of the sculpture reveals a humanoid spirit image that appears to combine a human-like body form or position with a head that is equally human and amphibian in appearance. The prominent brow, eyes, and central nose line with the small, simply incised depiction of a mouth is typical of Chinookan face sculpture, and yet is unique in its character and subtle detail. The essentially geometric treatment of the ribs and appendages has a softer, more rounded and less angular handling and feel than many Columbia River artifacts from farther upriver, which perhaps contributes to the lively, almost animated impression one gets from the carving of this unidentifiable image.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Steven C. Brown', with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Steven C. Brown

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