



Ivory Amulet-Orca Whale with Spirit Figures

Haida, c. 1820-1840

Sperm Whale Tooth

3 ¾" Long

Many, perhaps most, ivory and bone amulets were used by and sometimes made by shamans, usually as part of a necklace or attached to a garment. Ivory amulets are also known to have been attached to moosehide-armor tunics. The carving here is deep and precise, truly the work of a master artist and design composer. This one shows no piercing or other means to attach or suspend it, and was possibly owned by a high-ranking clan or house member and used as a personal talisman carried in a moose or deerhide pouch.

The overall image is an orca whale, indicated by the long dorsal fin extending back from the head. Two humanoid spirit figures are interwoven with the whale image in a compositional style that the late Haida artist Bill Reid sometimes referred to as 'punning', where multiple creatures are seen to occupy the same space. The small face on the bottom of the amulet, between the whale's pectoral fins and just above the large round ovoids of the tail, is the owner of the pair of legs beneath the whale's lower jaw, and the humanoid hands that appear between the flukes of the tail. The larger spirit-figure face or head, just below the tip of the whale's dorsal fin in the above photo, is associated with the humanoid arms and hands that surround the face and the reversely oriented legs and feet that overlay the whale's pectoral fins. The three images have been compacted together to fit closely within the confines of the whale tooth.

Design formlines are few, showing only in the head, pectoral fins and tail, and are done in an early archaic style. Formlines are broad in relation to the negative or carved-out spaces around inner ovoids and within U-shapes. No design elements usually classed as secondary are present. All the incised cuts and hollows have developed a dark patina through the approximately two centuries since the amulet was created, producing a beautiful contrast between the dark and polished ivory surfaces.

Steven C. Brown

January 2020

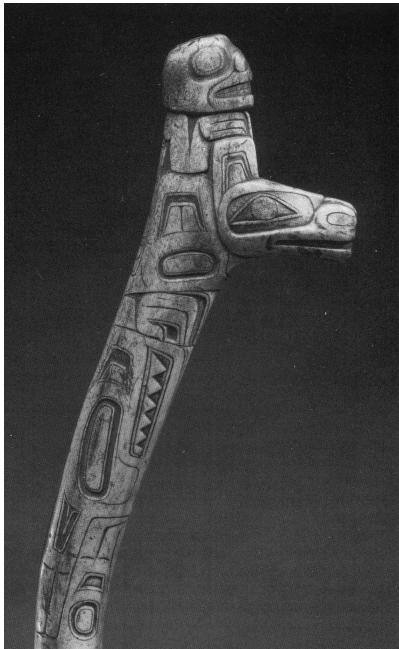
Related Objects:



Here is a carved inverted whale tooth, with the rounded tip cut off flat so it will balance upright. Not made to be worn, the root end and interior were thinned and hollowed out for use as a cup. Shamans would ingest salt water as part of their ritual preparations. Formlines here are relief-carved, completely covering the smoothed ivory surface, and there is no deep sculptural development as seen in the subject work. The archaic-style early design work seems to depict a sea monster with an extra-wide, sharply toothed mouth and sea creature-like fins and tail with no legs, feet, or wings. Probably Tlingit, c. 1800-1840. Private collection.



This amulet exhibits deep relief, semi-sculptural carving that represents a sea creature, cetacean or otherwise, with eight and a half spirit or skull faces in accompaniment. The composition lacks true classic formlines, and was probably created in the last quarter of the nineteenth century in SE Alaska by a Tlingit artist. Location unknown.



Carved of caribou antler, a very ivory-like material, this highly decorated war club exhibits both sculptural and two-dimensional formline design concepts. The early archaic design work that covers the smoothed surface is similar in style to the shaman's cup illustrated above, though certain characteristics suggest it was made by a different artist. This kind of war club is usually, though perhaps not exclusively, a Tsimshian object type, illustrating how the old archaic design style was once employed by all First Nations of the northern Northwest Coast, and from which all other tribal and regional styles of the area developed, including the very thin-formline styles that appeared through the nineteenth century among the Haida, Tsimshian, Haisla and Heiltsuk First Nations.