



Stone Tobacco Mortar

Haida, Late Eighteenth/Early Nineteenth Century

Hard, greenish hued stone

9 3/4" Long, 7 1/2" Wide, 5" High

Tobacco chewing was practiced on the Northwest Coast long before the arrival of Europeans and the concept of smoking the herb. The Haida excelled at growing a rare species of tobacco, which was mixed with lime obtained from burned clam shells, and either tucked into one's cheek or slowly chewed. Seeds of this plant were traded to the Tlingit and Tsimshian over time. The Native tobacco grown by the Haida, Tlingit, and Tsimshian was *nicotiana quadrivalvis var multivalvis*, a plant that is *anthropogenic*, meaning that it thrives best in man-made or disturbed habitats. It was not a plant native to the northern Northwest Coast, and how it came to arrive in the region is information largely lost to history. This tobacco was once grown in well-tended gardens in every major village of the area. As the imported variety of stronger tobacco (*nicotiana tobacum*) used for smoking in pipes came into the region via Euro-American trade, fewer Native growers raised the original crop and it slowly faded from use. It is recorded by George Dawson (Duff/Stewart, 1975) that by 1878, only a single elder Haida woman still cultivated a tobacco patch, located in Cumshewa village, and its tending ceased with her passing. The widespread lack of human cultivation led to the disappearance of the plant from the region. The same tobacco species was grown by the Mandan and Arikara people of the upper Missouri, where Lewis and Clark first encountered and described it. The Crow people of the northern plains also used the plant, not for smoking, but for making tobacco ties for the blessing of sanctified objects.

Once it was grown and harvested in its indigenous context, the leaves and seed pods of the plant were dried and finely crushed in stone mortars specially made for the purpose. The results were dried and pressed into cakes for storage and transport. A simple stone pestle would have taken part in the process, though few examples have survived. Some carved stone pestles, looking much like the traditional stone hand hammers used to drive chisels and wooden wedges, are known but rare (see examples below), with others appearing in a variety of forms.

Tobacco mortars, like the subject example, are often smallish, dense types of sculpture, the characteristics of the stone dictating the avoidance of thin or extending features. Many historical examples were evidently plain and undecorated, while what may have been a small percentage of others were masterfully shaped into ingenious zoomorphic forms, most likely representing the crest images of their original owners.

Stone work of this kind is accomplished by a technique commonly known as pecking; striking the subject stone with a smaller, hard, dense cobble, each impact pulverizing a small area of surface. This seems like a slow way to progress, but repeated tap-tap-taps can accomplish a great deal over time. (I once pecked a narrow 1/4" deep groove around the middle of a rugby-ball shaped beach stone, enough to hold a rope tightly in place for use as an anchor or the like, in about three hours of work.) There are, of course, untold hours expended in the shaping of a hollowed vessel of any kind, plain or sculptural. The beautifully sculpted subject mortar and

others like it represent some of the most labor-intensive artworks known from the Northwest Coast.

The compactly designed oval frog image surrounds the nearly round functional cavity of the subject mortar in a dynamic composition that depicts a frog as if it is poised to jump. The high arch of the wide-lipped mouth is a strong statement, abolishing any question of what is being represented. The bulging eyes surrounded by an ovoid-shaped ridge are the most recognizably Northwest Coast design feature on the frog, the limbs and back ridge being subtle and unembellished. Two raised nostrils with round openings lie between the eyesockets, and the rim of the bowl cavity sweeps upward fore and aft in the traditional manner of Northwest Coast wood and horn bowls.

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Alternate Views:



These views emphasize the strong curve of the mouth with wide, flat lips, and lets us see the subtle hollows and ridges of the soft area beneath the frog's jaw. A subtle sweep of forelegs streams back from the raised ovoid ridge of the eyesockets, though no feet are indicated as if they're tucked beneath the frog's body.

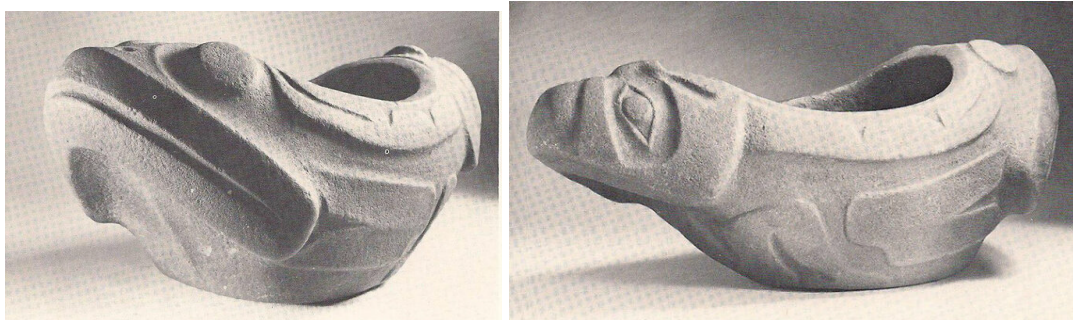


Views from above illustrate the depth and refinement of the hollowed bowl cavity, as well as the refined 'wings' that follow the curve of the frogs back, and which may have served as convenient hand grips for lifting the vessel.



Profile view show the subtle curve of the bowl cavity and the strong upper parts of the hind legs with a small tapered bulge of a tail. The hind feet are also composed to disappear beneath the frog's body, which adds to the perception of the frog just about to spring.

Related Objects:



Nearly twice as long as the subject mortar, this example combines the image of a frog or bottom fish and a human at opposite ends of the vessel. Shallowly cut pectoral fins stream back from the corners of the frog/fish mouth, and the man's body and legs are drawn up against the outer surface of the mortar. The man's head tapers from jaws to forehead, suggesting the tail of the frog/fish, and his face is carved in the manner of a wooden mask. His lower lip is blended with the flat, oval rim of the vessel. His arms sweep around just below the rim of the vessel, terminating in a pair of digits more fish-like than human, their tips helping to define the rims of the frog/fish eyesockets. The similarly large, opening statement of the wide-lipped mouth and other subtle details raise the possibility that this and the subject mortar may have been created by the same highly skilled and inventive artist. The impression of dynamic movement in this solid stone vessel is also reflected in the subject mortar.



Length 17", collected by George M. Dawson at Kiusta in 1878. McCord Museum, Montreal, #1205a.



This frog image is similarly compact like those above, but much more literal in its representation of the creature, with full limbs and feet included in the sculpture. The wide, angled lips are slightly rounded, and a subtle rounded bulge appears appropriately beneath the jaw of the frog. The classically Northwest Coast sweeping, curved rim is embellished with double parallel grooves that encircle the vessel. The bulging eyes are of the traditional form with ovoid-shaped irises and raised eyelid lines. Between the elbows and knees of the frog are incised formline elements with an angular, eighteenth-century style.

Length 9". Collected on Haida Gwaii in 1879 by I. W. Powell. Canadian Museum of History, Ottawa. XII-B-317.



An even more compact frog than those above contains this nearly round mortar cavity, its limbs sweeping off the rim and down to the bottom of the vessel. The eyesocket is succinctly defined between the upper edge of the mouth and the inside edge of the forelegs. The eyes, with ovoid-shaped irises and traditional eyelid form, are unexpectedly expressive for such a hard, stone vessel such as this.

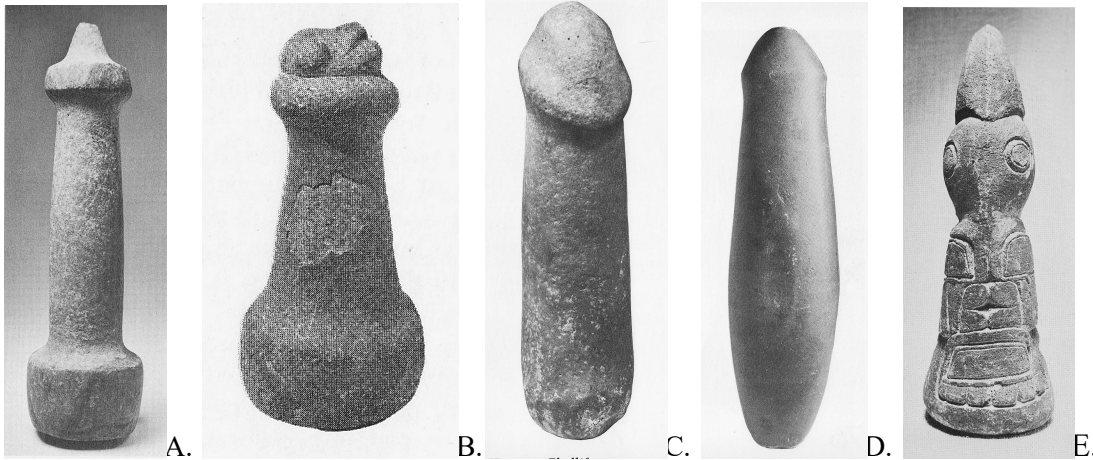
Length 9", McCord Museum, McGill university, Montreal. #1205b. Haida, collected by George M. Dawson in 1878.



Several aspects of this vessel indicate that it is in an unfinished state; the bowl cavity itself seems not to be excavated as fully as those on completed vessels, and the heads and limbs of the creature(s) represented appear to be in a roughed-out stage of development, with more definition and detail wanting and not yet present. Nonetheless the depressions that define the limbs and facial features are quite deep, indicating a great deal of effort by its maker thus far. The creature visible in this view is most likely a bear, suggested by the large nostrils and wide mouth lacking the incisor teeth that would be expected in a beaver image. At the opposite end, another face appears that is possibly human, but not yet well defined.

Length 13 ¼", Museum of Northern British Columbia, Prince Rupert, #2219.

A range of pestle types:



Pestles are the other side of the picture that makes these mortars functional, though most if not all extant mortars have been separated from their accompanying pestle long ago. Example A is shaped like a classic hand hammer for driving wood chisels and splitting wedges, though the striking area is much smaller than the standard for those and the grip area longer to enable easily reaching the bottom of a mortar cavity. Example B could be a hand hammer, though the bottom appears smaller and more rounded than is typical for those objects. C and D explain themselves, and example E is a very developed sculpture with extensive surface incisions representing Raven, the life-bringer.