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OCEANIC & ESKIMO ART



Punuk Thimble Holder with Rounded Top

E 295) A rare archaic thimble holder with incised decor to both sides. The general shape appears to be that of some form of stylized marine mammal a small whale or a seal. The body of the animal is indicated by the incised lines covering the flat sides of the hook and the protruding lateral flippers. There are three basic formats for thimble holders : double hook, single hook, and double yoke. In this case it is a double hook form with a rounded terminal section pierced for attachment to the sewing-kit hook. Skin thimbles were made from tanned and shaved seal skin with an attached loop or sometimes tip-less so that they could be hooked on to the holder for storage and carriage. Punuk culture, Alaska. Mineralized walrus tusk (*Odobenus rosmarus divergens*). Circa 600-1000 AD. 11,3 x 0,2 cm.

Sewing equipment is of the utmost importance as can be seen by the extensive sets of various tools used in the making of skin items and the decorative elements that are added to these most mundane of household equipment's. The typical sewing kit includes attachment its hook, needles, a needle-case, a case-stopper, skin thimbles, a thimble-holder, awls and sewing thread made from specific types of sinew from various sources depending on the strength and desired diameter of the needed thread. The kit is carried by men and women. The slightest tear for example in a kayak-skin must be sewn and patched immediately and this must be done on the spot by the hunter.

Kaj Birket-Smith reports that in Greenland "...braided sinew thread is generally used. This may among the Eskimo be of several qualities. For the coarser sorts, sinews of white whale (*Beluga leucas*) or narwhal (*Monodon monoceros*) are employed; the sinews of reindeer furnish an excellent material, while that of the bottle-nosed seal (*Cystophora cristata*) is also used, the poorest kind being made from the sinews of the harp seal (*Phoca groenlandica*). The end of the dried sinew is raveled out with a needle, after which the sinew is split with the thumbs, the other fingers holding apart the fibers already made. The strands are then rolled over the thigh or the cheek and may now be used directly or plaited as a cord. The finished sinew thread is kept hanging on the double-hooked thimble guards." Birket-Smith, Kaj : THE GREENLAND BOW. Meddelelser om Grønland , 1918, pp. 26-28.

Literature:

See a very similar however much later example from the Thule culture in the British Museum : Am,St.754.b; and another of the single hook type in the Herschel Island Mueum, Canada.

Ref. : Catalogue Raisonné of the Alaska Commercial Company Collection, Phoebe Apperson Hearst Museum of Anthropology. Nelson H. H. Graburn, Molly Lee, Jean-Loup Roussetot, Robin K. Wright, Alaska Commercial Company Collection, University of California Press, 1996