



Eskimo Wood Mask

An early, very fine, and expressive mask representing an ancestral spirit, or a shaman. The realistic features are relatively unusual in the corpus of Northern Eskimo masks as most of the later types are quite highly stylized. The sensitive face offers an open and smiling expression with a subtle shaping of the cheeks, chin and forehead. The inside of the mask shows adzing and carving marks made with non-metal tools. The inside of the face is actually reminiscent of a human skull perhaps in an effort to display the duality of life and death. The outer edge is pierced in a regular manner either for the insertion of feathers or the stick-supports for a mobile structure forming a framework around the mask. The lateral edges are shaved off, possibly due the direction of the grain of the wood causing structural frailty. The teeth are carved from marine ivory in the realistic shape of human incisors and carefully implanted into the lower lip. The mask has a scattering of thick, salt-like deposits on both the inside and the outside. The front of the mask has several pockmarks as if large birds pecked it, which may have happened during the lengthy exposure of the mask perhaps displayed on a shaman's grave as is the norm.

Inupiak (Inupiaq) language group, Point Hope, Northern Alaska. Weathered Alaskan Yellow Cedar (*Cupressus nootkatensis*) and marine ivory with a thick granular paint-like substance and salt and sand deposits. 18,5 x 12,5 x 5,8 cm. 18th/19th century or earlier.

Exhibitions

Very early masks of this type are possibly death masks related to deceased shaman like the example found in a Siberian, Old Bering Sea culture, grave dating to around 2000 BP at Ekven which is now in the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography, Saint Petersburg. On this example the eyeholes are stopped up with bone pieces. In other cases masks of this type were attached to the grave markers of important hunters and shaman like seen here below photographed at the mouth of the Kuskokwim River further South.

Of the 129 Point Hope masks in the collection of the Sheldon Jackson Museum in Alaska only 4 examples have ivory teeth. The extreme rarity of ivory teeth in the masks of the region is not explained – it may be due to the anteriority of masks with ivory teeth in relation to the ones with wooden teeth.

For due diligence a carbon 14 test (by Xylodata, France, N° Poz-74930) has been run on the wood which gives a mean date of A.D. 1650 \pm 15 years. This pertains only to the material and not to the date or age of the artistic use of the wood. It is a well-known fact that the Eskimo populations principally used found wood; either from recent beaching of driftwood or pre-used wood recuperated from earlier sites. The stylistic analysis confirms the 18th/19th century dating, yet the c-14 result does open a small door towards a slightly earlier date possibility situated in the second half of the 17th century.

Literature:

Ref. :

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