



Sea Otter Amulet

A hunting ornament from either a baidarka (Aleut type kayak) or from a hunting visor carved in the form of a recumbent sea otter floating on its back. The animal is shown with the front paws raised to the face, framing and supporting the chin. The eyes are pierced for the inlay of seal or walrus whiskers and blackened, and the ears are shown as subtle knobs to either side of the forehead. The body is incised to show four ridges representing a skeletal vision of the rib cage with three inlaid dot decorations forming a triangle on the belly. The otters short and pointed tail projects downwards flanked by the splayed, spatulate rear paws. The rear of the amulet is carved with a raised rectangular section pierced laterally twice for attachment.

The sea otter (*Enhydra lutris*) is the smallest marine mammal in the Arctic regions, but it is still a remarkably imposing animal with tanned pelts reaching up to 2 meters in length or more (see the 1892 photo for comparison). Sea otters were considered to be related to humans as the Aleut felt that the organization of the animals' internal organs was identical to humans. There is a strong spiritual connection as well due to the human style attitudes of the animal concerning the care of offspring, eating, handling prey etc. The giant sea otters were hunted specifically by the Aleut for their remarkably thick fur pelts which were used and traded locally as far south as Southern California and all the way up to the Arctic Circle. They were traded to Russian fur traders for their Asian markets as of the late 17th century.

Aleut People, Aleutian Islands, Alaska.

Walrus tusk with a fine patina of age and use.

7,6 cm

Circa 1850-1890 AD

Exhibitions

For many maritime indigenous cultures throughout the North Pacific, especially the Ainu in the Kuril Islands north of Japan, the Koryaks and Itelmen of Kamchatka in North Eastern Russia, the Aleut in the Aleutian Islands of Alaska, the Haida and other tribes of British Columbia on Pacific coast of North America, the sea otter played an important role as a cultural, as well as material, resource. These cultures, many of which have strong animist traditions full of legends and stories in which many aspects of the natural world are associated with spirits, regard the sea otter as kin to humans. The Nuu-chah-nulth, Haida, and other First Nations of coastal British Columbia used the warm and luxurious pelts as chiefs' regalia. Sea-otter pelts were given in potlatches to mark coming-of-age ceremonies, weddings, and funerals. The Aleuts carved sea otter bones for use as ornaments and in games and used powdered sea-otter baculum (penile bone) as a medicine for fever.

The sea otter is a recurring figure in Ainu folklore and a major Ainu epic, the Kutune Shirka, tells the tale of wars and struggles over a golden sea-otter. Some Ainu folktales portray the sea-otter as an occasional messenger between humans and the creator. Versions of a widespread Aleut legend tell of lovers or despairing women who plunge into the sea and become otters. These stories have been associated with the many human-like behavioral features of the sea otter, including its apparent playfulness, the strong mother-offspring bonds and the use of tools, all yielding to a ready anthropomorphism.

Literature:

Ref. :

<http://eskimo-art.org>

<https://sainsburycentre.ac.uk>

Fitzhugh, William W. & Crowell, Aron : Crossroads of Continents. National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, D.C, 1988, p. 301, fig. 426.

Fitzhugh William & W Susan A Kaplan : Inua: Spirit World of the Bering Sea Eskimo. Exhibition catalogue, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, D.C, 1982, fig. 282, pg. 235.

The Aleutian Island people were great and versatile hunters taking whales, walrus, seals and sea otters from their kayaks (bidarka) and umiaks (bidara). The sea otter, particularly important in Aleut mythology was believed to offer protection to the hunter. Oral tradition described sea otters are transformed humans, descendants of an incestuous brother and sister. The engraved designs on the charm indicate the animal's ribcage, which is home to its soul. Charms representing sea otters and other animals were

often carried by the hunter or attached to the kayak or incorporated into the designs of the hunting equipment to improve the hunt. Other examples of hunting amulets or charms include a « kayak ornament » from circa 1842 incorporating two very similar sea otter charms, together with small whales and other sea animals, in the Ulster Museum in Northern Ireland. Other sea otter charms can be found in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, accession no. 1979.206.890, the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, accession no. E035905, and the Peabody Museum at Harvard University, accession no. 69-30-10/2028. A well-known example from the collection of Rita Alix & Oscar Meyer sold at Drouot Orsay on December 1st 1977 was acquired by the Musée de l'Homme (N° 71.1977.119.2) in 1977 (presently in the Musée du Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, Paris) another example from the James Hooper collection was sold at Christie's, New York, 20 October 1994 as lot 28 and a number of other examples have been offered on the international art market over the past three decades.