

Finch & C^o



63 Ancient Ipiutak, prehistoric Inuit marine ivory toggle
100-600AD

Size: 5cm high x 3cm deep

Provenance: Es. Ruth and Marc Franklin Collection

The ancient Inuit or Eskimo cultures of the Bering Strait derived their subsistence from the hunting of sea mammals including the whale, but most importantly, the walrus. The large supply of game in the Bering Strait area enabled them to improve and develop their hunting methods, weapons and implements and gave them the leisure to decorate innumerable objects with engraved ornament or carved figures.

This art is unique in the world and the many objects that were decorated with fine linear engraved designs have no known antecedents in the Arctic.

Despite archaeological work in Siberia, St Lawrence Island and the Alaskan mainland the exact origin of the Old Bering sea culture is still much debated, and the true origins of Ipiutak culture are not known.

Certain artistic characteristics of the Ipiutak link them to the Asian mainland. The Sino-Siberian animal style is reflected in some of the sculptures, and their composite burial masks are similar to those found in bronze and jade in graves at Anyang the Shang capital in Northern China. Some say that the Ipiutak were a transplanted Asian culture that settled at Point Hope on the coast of North West Alaska spreading to other areas in the same period that the Old Bering sea culture flourished in Siberia and St Lawrence Island.

With the exception of certain aspects of harpoon technology Ipiutak art is the richest and most sophisticated among the creations of the prehistoric Inuit or Eskimo. There is more variety of form and a greater sense of the fantastic in animal and bird sculptures than is found in Old Bering sea art, and this is ably demonstrated in this well carved example of Ipiutak art.

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LITERATURE

THE ANCIENT INUIT OR ESKIMO CULTURES OF THE BERING STRAIT DERIVED THEIR SUBSISTENCE FROM THE HUNTING OF SEA MAMMALS INCLUDING THE WHALE, BUT MOST IMPORTANTLY, THE WALRUS. THE LARGE SUPPLY OF GAME IN THE THE BERING STRAIT AREA ENABLED THEM TO IMPROVE AND DEVELOP THEIR HUNTING METHODS, WEAPONS AND IMPLEMENTS AND GAVE THEM THE LEISURE TO DECORATE INNUMERABLE OBJECTS WITH ENGRAVED ORNAMENT OR CARVED FIGURES.

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DESPITE ARCHAEOLOGICAL WORK IN SIBERIA, ST LAWRENCE AND THE ALASKAN MAINLAND THE EXACT ORIGIN OF THE OLD BERING SEA CULTURE IS STILL MUCH DEBATED, AND THE TRUE ORIGINS OF IPIUTAK CULTURE ARE NOT KNOWN. CERTAIN ARTISTIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE IPIUTAK LINK THEM TO THE ASIAN MAINLAND. THE SINO-SIBERIAN ANIMAL STYLE IS REFLECTED IN SOME OF THE SCULPTURES, AND THEIR COMPOSITE BURIAL MASKS ARE SIMILAR TO THOSE FOUND FOUND IN BRONZE AND JADE IN GRAVES AT ANYANG THE SHANG CAPITAL IN NORTHERN CHINA. SOME SAY THAT THE IPIUTAK WERE A TRANSPLANTED ASIAN CULTURE THAT SETTLED AT POINT HOPE ON THE COAST OF NORTH WEST ALASKA SPREADING TO OTHER AREAS IN THE SAME PERIOD THAT THE OLD BERING SEA CULTURE FLOURISHED IN SIBERIA AND ST LAWRENCE ISLAND.

WITH THE EXCEPTION OF CERTAIN ASPECTS OF HARPOON TECHNOLOGY IPIUTAK ART IS THE RICHEST AND MOST SOPHISTICATED AMONG THE CREATIONS OF THE PRE-HISTORIC INUIT OR ESKIMO. THERE IS MORE VARIETY OF FORM AND A GREATER SENSE OF THE FANTASTIC IN ANIMAL AND BIRD SCULPTURES THAN IS FOUND IN OLD BERING SEA ART, AND THIS IS ABLY DEMONSTRATED IN THIS WELL CARVED EXAMPLE OF IPIUTAK ART.