

Aleut sea otter ornament for a *baidarka* (kayak), 18th/19th century, 8.3 cm



Bruce White photos

This ivory carving, with sea lion whisker insets in the eyes, on the abdomen and tail, was attached to a baleen strip extending across the deck in front of the hatch.

Provenance:

"Collected" by Abijah Curtiss (1831-1888), an Eastern U.S. railroad executive who lived in Yonkers, NY. Donated in 1931 by his son, Frederic Haines Curtiss (b. 1869, a Boston banker) to the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Cambridge, MA (described on accession records as a "carved ivory pendant [seal]", Peabody #K69) as part of two donations that year by F. H. Curtiss of a total of 47 pieces, of which 37 were identified as Northwest Coast Indian (mostly Tlingit, and some possibly Haida and Nootka). The number and nature of these other objects suggests that this Aleut sea otter was not field-collected by Abijah Curtiss in the course of work in Alaska, but possibly during a mid-19th century tourist visit to the Northwest U.S. or Canada, or from a curio dealer in the Eastern United States. (Information from Frederic Haines Curtiss: *A Genealogy of the Curtiss Family*, Boston, 1903, and Susan Haskell, Peabody Museum, personal communication).

Exchanged in 1958 for some Moche pottery with Alan R. Sawyer (Associate Curator of Primitive [pre-Columbian] Arts, 1919-), Art Institute of Chicago
Raymond Wielgus, Chicago, 1959 ("RW 59-148" in red on bottom rear)
Robert Duperrier, Paris
Alain Schoffel, Paris

Exhibited:

The Raymond Wielgus Collection, The Museum of Primitive Art, New York, 1960, No. 63 (misidentified as "Eskimo. Spearthrower tip"). Listed as ex-Wielgus Collection object #59-148 in Diane M. Pelrine: *Affinities of Form. Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas from the Raymond and Clara Wielgus Collection*. Prestel, 1996, p. 221 (misidentified as "Inuit. Atl-atl tip in the form of a sea otter").

Literature:

Roza G. Liapunova (1967): Zoomorfnaya skul'ptura aleutov (Zoomorphic sculpture of the Aleuts), in *Kul'tura i byt narodov Ameriki*, Sbornik MAE, Vol. 24, pp. 38-54, Plates I and III (see below)

Elizaveta P. Orlova (1964): *Chukotskaya, Koryakskaya, Eskimoskaya, Aleutskaya reznaya kost'* (Chukchi, Koryak, Eskimo and Aleut ivory carving), Novosibirsk, Sibirskoe otdelenie Akademii Nauk SSSR.

"Hunting of sea otters played a very important role in the Aleut economy. A number of mythological stories have also been associated with this animal, and the image of the sea otter is even more frequently encountered in Aleut sculpture, especially on the kayak (*baidarka*), either inside, or on the deck attached to baleen strips used to hold hunting implements. In the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography collections there are also figures of sea otters that were apparently not associated with the *baidarka* but presumably had similar magic functions. Some of these, carved from walrus ivory and wood, possibly date from a later period." (Liapunova, 1967, p. 42)

In Aleut sculpture the sea otter is often shown lying on its back, floating on the water in feeding position with its forepaws raised to its mouth or cheeks, and the female otter (the sex of the animal is usually shown) often represented with a cub lying in a similar position on its belly. Of the many different examples of such figures in the MAE (Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography) collections and discussed by Liapunova, this is most similar to the 7.5 cm ivory figure (that was purchased in 1881 by I.S. Poliakov in a Nagasaki market together with a group of netsuke), described under 4.) in Liapunova, 1967, p. 43, and illustrated on Plate 1, Fig. 9 (MAE No. 162-1/19).

Liapunova also describes "... three figures of sea otters which have no features indicating that they were attached to or hung from anything. They were probably figures made for ritual purposes³¹, or as toys and later possibly for exchange or sale. These figures of sea otters are represented in the same way as those described above, but in a more realistic manner and without elements of stylization" (Liapunova, p. 44, and Plate 3, Figs. 2, 3 and 4). They are significantly larger than the kayak figures and made of either ivory (12 and 16.8 cm, see photo of the latter below) or painted wood (13.7 cm).

³¹S.V. Ivanov: *Materialy po izobrazitelnomu iskusstvu narodov Sibiri XIX-nachala XX v.* Moscow, 1954, p. 478. The pertinent paragraph reads: "A number of researchers noted that in former times the Aleuts arranged special annual winter festivals consisting of high-spirited ceremonial games and dances, during which, on the shaman's instructions, the spirits would throw out a whale on the coast. During these festivals or ceremonies reminiscent of religious dances of the North West Coast Indians, the Aleuts danced in masks representing the various sea animals. Based on the recorded descriptions, there were significant differences between the dances and ceremonies of the various Aleut groups. The images (of which there is no exact description) were produced before the festivities and most likely represented animals or their spirit-owners."

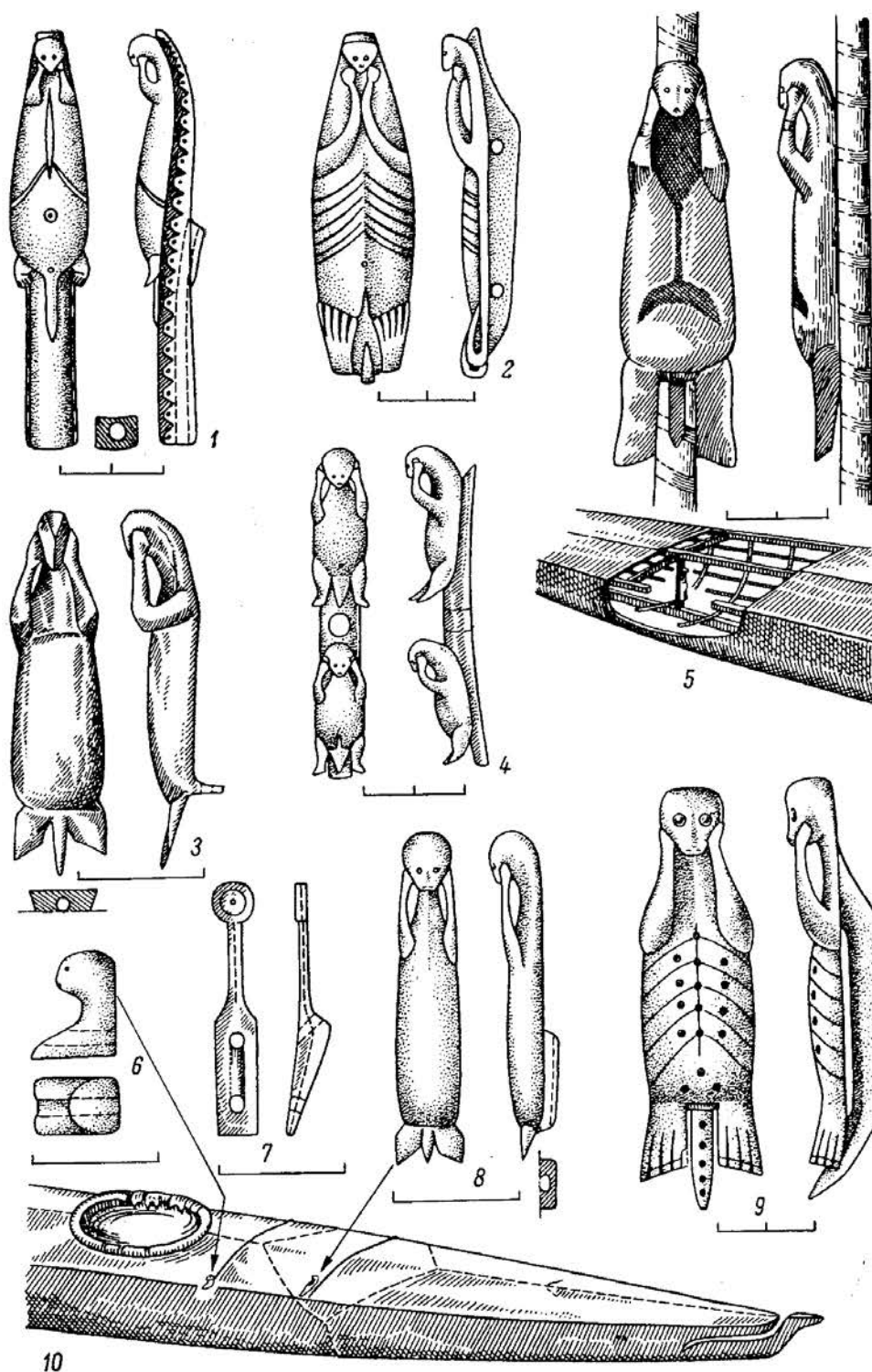


Табл. I.

1 — костяная фигурка бобра на подставке. № 4507-14; 2 — костяная фигурка бобра. № 2438-17; 3 — костяная фигурка бобра на модели однолючной байдарки. № 4104-33; 4 — костяная пластинка с двумя бобрами. № 4507-16; 5 — деревянная фигурка бобра, прикрепленная внутри однолючной байдарки. № 593-76; 6 — костяная головка бобра на модели однолючной байдарки. № 2768-211; 7 — костяная стилизованная фигурка бобра на модели однолючной байдарки. № 4104-38; 8 — костяная фигурка морского бобра на модели однолючной байдарки. № 2868-211; 9 — костяная фигурка бобра. № 162-1/19; 10 — модель байдарки. № 2768-211.

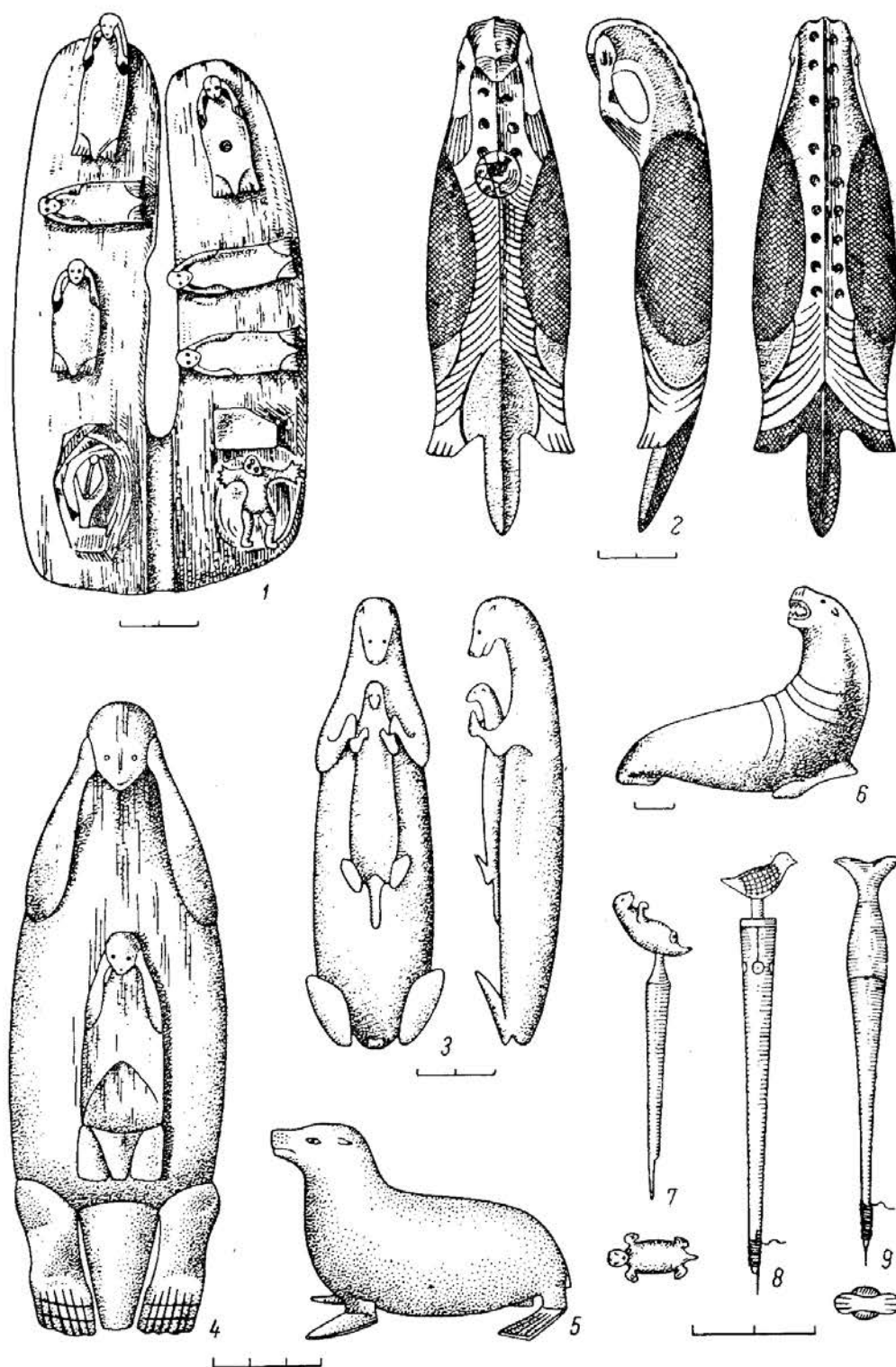
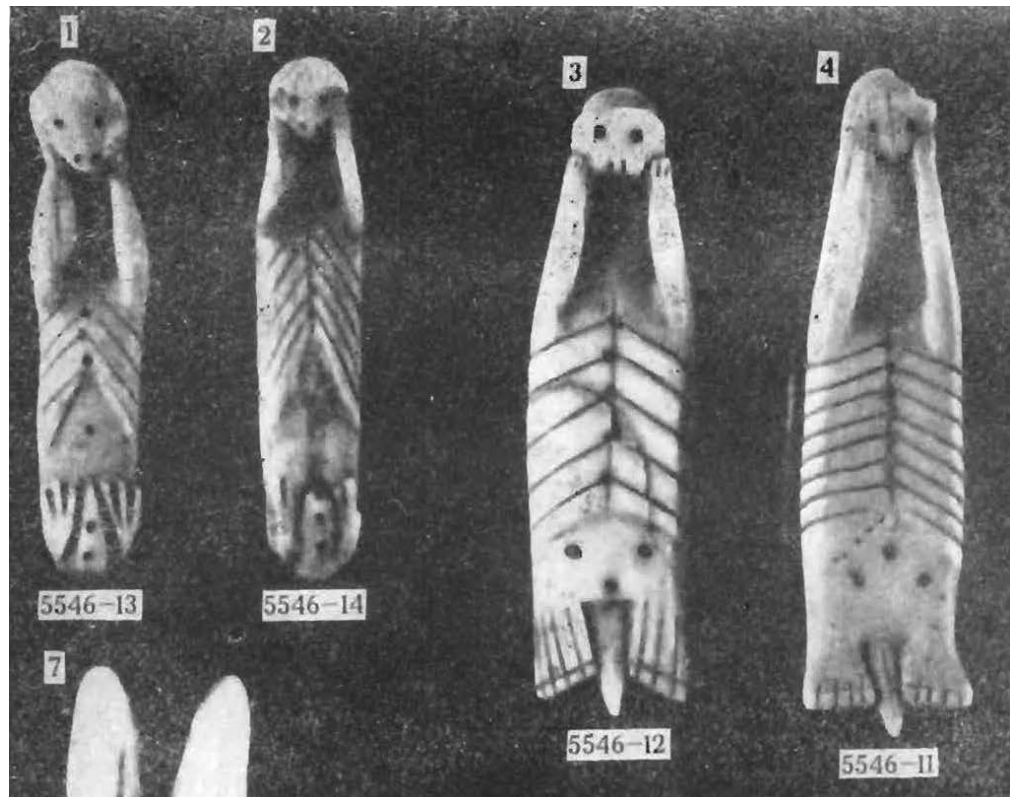


Табл. III.

1 — скульптурная группа. № 337-17/3; 2 — деревянная раскрашенная фигурка бобра. № 2938-9; 3 — костяная фигурка самки бобра с детенышем. № 4507-11; 4 — то же. № 2938-16; 5 — костяная фигурка самки морского котика. № 2937-25; 6 — костяная фигурка сивуча. № 4104-60; 7 — фигурка бобра из кости на конце татуировальной иглы. № 2868-55; 8 — костяная птичка на конце татуировальной иглы. № 2868-56; 9 — изображение задней половины туловища кита на конце татуировальной иглы. № 2868-27.



From Orlova, Plate 52

MAE 2938-16, 16.8 cm

Other, probably early 19th century, ivory Aleut sea otters in the collections of the Russian Museum of Ethnography (GME, No. 5546-11 to -14) are shown in Orlova, 1964 (Plate 52, Figs. 1-4; see above). However, little reliable collection or other information is available concerning these figures. Although correctly identified as Aleut by Elizaveta Orlova (1899-1976), her summary list of museum records for the various collections (pp. 36-37) lists collection 5546 as comprising 15 items originating from "Indians" from the North West Coast of America, and the "collector" is listed only as "Bobrinsky Palace" (in St. Petersburg). The objects were obtained by "transfer" (in fact, probably confiscation) sometime between 1920 and 1927 (the Bolsheviks demolished the wings of the palace in 1929). The Registrar is listed as "unknown", and no year of registration is given.

As leader of the ethnographic section of Ryabushinsky's "Kamchatka Expedition", Vladimir Jochelson in 1909-1910 collected in the Aleutian Islands a number of ivory whistles and other "toys" carved in the form of sea otters. These are also illustrated by Orlova (Plate 55, see below), but no specific collection or related information for these objects is provided in her summary list. Their style and quality of carving differ significantly from similar early- to mid-19th century objects that were made for attachment to kayaks.

СПИСОК

коллекций резной чукотской, эскимосской, корякской и алеутской кости в фондах Государственного музея этнографии народов СССР

Номер кол- лекции	Народность	Район сбора	Коли- чест- во		Собира- тель	Способ поступления	Год сбора	Регистратор	Год регистрации
			номеров	предметов					
Эскимосы									
1433	Эскимосы	Аляска, Гренландия	6	6	С. И. Сергель	Собраны по по- ручению Русского музея	1908	С. И. Сергель	1909
1709	Эскимосы	Чукотский	93	93	Киевский ун-т	Обмен на дубле- ты Русского музея	1909	Е. П. Орлова Л. Н. Шаврова Н. М. Леушина	1929 1941 1960
2149	Эскимосы	С.-З. Америка	1	1	М. А. Миллер	Дар	1912	Э. А. Ухтомский	1912
2167	Эскимосы	О-в Имаклик и с. Нау- кан	15	15	Н. П. Сокольников	Собрано по по- ручению Русского музея	1904— 1907	А. А. Макаренко	1912
5705	То же	Там же	4	4	В. К. Арсеньев	Дар	1924	В. В. Романовская	1939
1267	Эскимосы, алеуты	С.-З. Америка, побере- жье Аляски	7	7	Царскосельский арсе- нал	Передача		С. И. Руденко	1907
3585	Эскимосы	Аляска	1	1	М. А. Миллер	Дар	1906	В. Н. Васильев	1912
5546	Индейцы	С.-З. Америка	15	15	Особняк Бобринского	Передача	1920— 1927	Неизвестен	—
Чукчи									
1011	Чукчи, коря- ки	Анадырский округ	82	103	Н. П. Сокольников	Дар	1904	Э. К. Пекарский	1906
1021	Чукчи	Чукотский п-ов	8	10	Н. А. Комаров (рот- мистр)	Покупка	1906	Д. А. Клеменц	1906
1143	Чукчи, эски- мосы	Чукотский п-ов	13	21	Н. П. Сокольников	Дар	1904— 1907	Д. А. Клеменц	1907
1058	Чукчи	Чукотский п-ов	6	9	Гродековский музей	Дар	1906	Э. К. Пекарский	1907

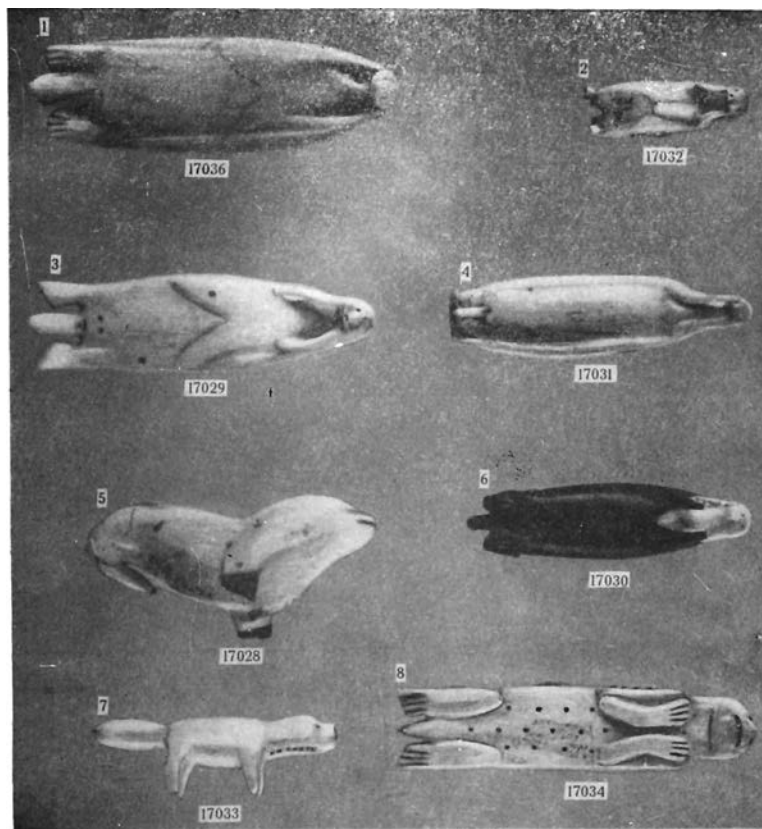


Рис. 55. Бобры, сивуч, песец.



A selection of other Aleut sea otter figures (from left to right and top to bottom): Ex-James Hooper Collection (8.9 cm); National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC (7 and 10 cm); Musée du Quai Branly, Paris (6.8 cm); Museo de America, Madrid (7 cm); Ajaloomuseum, Tallinn, Estonia (7.6 and 8.3 cm); Kupreianov collection, Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturegeschichte, Oldenburg.