

## Aleut ivory hunting hat ornament, 18<sup>th</sup>/19<sup>th</sup> century, 5.6 cm



Bruce White photos

### **Provenance:**

Sotheby's New York, American Indian Art Sale 5354, June 21, 1985, Lot 89

(Misidentified as an "Eskimo toggle", a generally meaningless catch-all term used to describe any Eskimo ivory with a hole whose actual function is unknown to the writer.)

Seated ivory human figures carved for attachment to the front of open-crown Aleut wooden hunting visors are very rare. It appears that only about 12 such figures are known, and this is a particularly unusual example insofar as most are relatively crude and/or incomplete. Because the "universe" of these objects is so small, they are described and illustrated below for reference and comparison purposes.

The world's largest collection of such visors is in the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (MAE/Kunstkamera) in St. Petersburg, Russia, and of the 30 wooden headdresses in their collection, only five are decorated with such figures (2868-23, 4104-2, 4104-3, 4104-4 and 4104-5; Liapunova, 1985). No. 2868-23 appears to have arrived at the MAE between 1750 and 1780 and was probably collected in the Shumagin Islands in 1741 by members of Bering's Second Expedition. Numbers 4104-2 and 4104-4 were originally in the Museum of the Admiralty, which contained extensive collections from Russian round-the-world and other travel at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. They were later transferred to the Central Naval Museum, and from there to the MAE in 1931 (Liapunova, 1985, pp. 4 and 35).

Of the five wooden headdresses in the British Museum, that contains the second largest collection, only one (NWC 3) collected on Cook's third voyage in 1778 contains a seated human figure of this type. Two other seated figures that are no longer attached to hunting visors are also in the British Museum collections (VAN 2327 and 2236, see f. below). The early date of these specimens is consistent with our knowledge that the production of fine Aleut hunting headgear had ended by the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

This decline in quality is clearly evident by comparison with hats collected by Vladimir Jochelson and others at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and kept in the Russian Ethnographic Museum (GME, formerly the State Museum of Ethnography of the Peoples of the USSR; see Gorbacheva and Liapunova, 1985).

It appears that aside from the 12 objects considered here, no other surviving examples of seated figures made for hunting visors have been described or published, with the possible exception of two highly eroded or fragmentary objects excavated from prehistoric/early historic archaeological sites at Karluk and near Akhiok on Kodiak Island (Black, 1991, pp. 40-41).

## **Aleut hunting visor seated figures in museum collections**

a.) MAE 2868-23 is described and illustrated by Ivanov (1949).

"Finer seated ivory human figures were attached by sinew thread to Aleut wooden hunting headgear<sup>1</sup>. They are characteristic for open-crown hats, similar to visors, and are usually located in front at the top edge of the visor<sup>2</sup>. On one very old visor of this type from the collections of the MAE (No. 2868-23) and that had been much used, there is the figure shown in Fig. 6. Its height is only 3.5 cm, the right leg is broken, the trunk is short and the neck disproportionately long, but the head is well done and has realistic features. The outline of the figure is especially well carved. The hands are joined, resting in the lap and carved schematically, with several incised lines representing the fingers. The legs are bent at the knee and connected to the shoulders." (Ivanov, 1949, p. 201)

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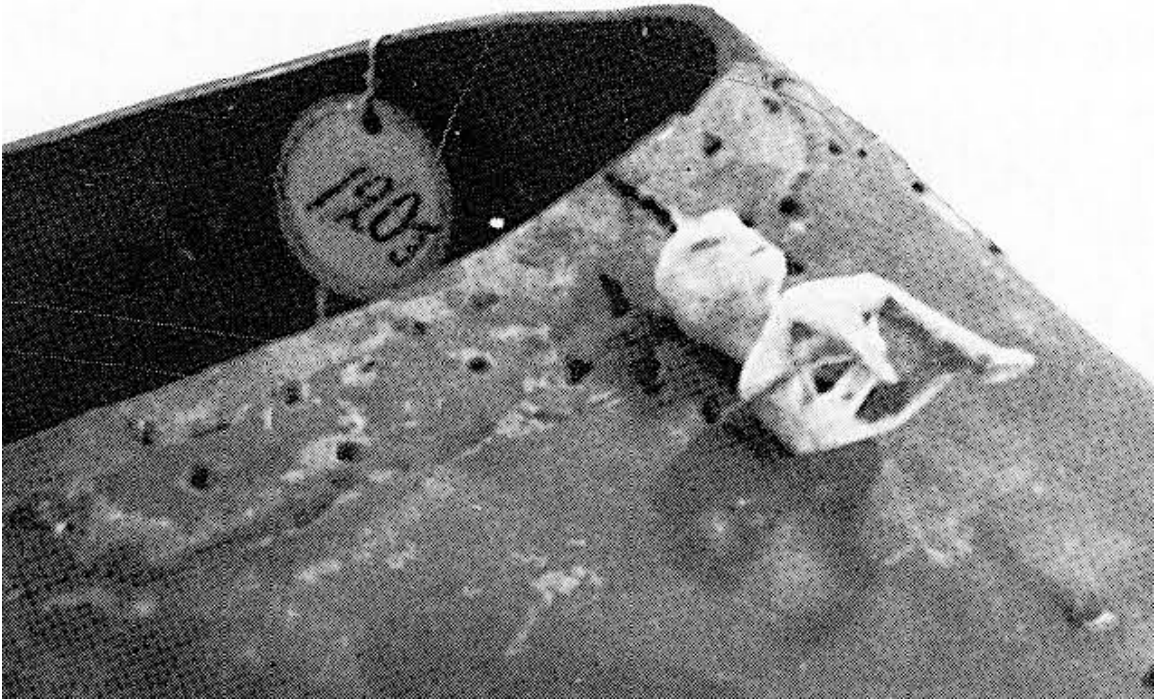
<sup>1</sup>Sometimes such figures are carved from a soft white stone (apparently "soapstone"). See, for example, A.P. Sokolov: "Expedition to the Aleutian Islands of Captains Krenitsin and Levashev, 1764-1769", *Zapiski Gidrograficheskogo Departamenta*, St. Petersburg, 1852, p. 99. However, I have not seen headgear with stone figures in any museum collections.

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, an image of such a visor with a figure at the top in the "Atlas" to Cook's [Third] Voyage, Plate 48.

- b.) The engraving for plate 48 of the "Atlas" to Cook's Third Voyage, by William Sharp after John Webber, shows an Aleut man wearing a hunting visor with a seated human figure. The actual visor shown in the illustration is now in the British Museum (King, 1981, pp. 48-49).
- c.) Four later hunting visors with seated figures are in the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography, St. Petersburg (4104-2, 4104-3, 4104-4 and 4104-5; Liapunova, 1985, Black, 1991).
- d.) Two "cube figures" from the von Asch collection are in the Ethnographic Collection of the Institute for Social and Cultural Anthropology at Göttingen University (Hauser-Schäublin and Krüger, 2007; catalogue numbers 58 and 59, pp. 246-247).
- e.) A seated ivory "cube figure" suitable for a hunting hat was found at the Kizhuyak site on Kodiak Island (KOD 043; a radiocarbon date from the site gives  $600 \pm 100$  BP), and is now in the Alutiiq Museum in Kodiak (Myrtle Olsen Collection, AM 603).
- f.) Two other figures are in the British Museum, in addition to the one on the hunting visor collected by Cook. "A hollow cube figurine, a helmet ornament, late 18<sup>th</sup> century, British Museum VAN 2327" is shown in Black (2003; Fig. 109b, p. 101), and a second very similar figure (BM 2236) is reproduced in Kaepler (2011; Fig. 6.101, pp. 216-217).

#### **Literature:**

- Black, L.T. (1991): *Glory Remembered - Wooden Headgear of Alaska Sea Hunters*, Juneau.
- Black, L.T. (2003): *Aleut Art*, Aleutian/Pribilof Islands Association, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Anchorage
- Gorbacheva, V.A., and Liapunova, R.G. (1985): Golovnye ubory aleutov v sobranii GME (Aleut headdresses in the collections of the State Museum of Ethnography), *Sbornik muzeia antropologii i etnografii*, 40:50-58.
- Hauser-Schäublin, B. and Krüger, G., Eds. (2007): *Siberia and Russian America: Culture and Art from the 1700s - The Asch Collection*, Prestel, Göttingen.
- Ivanov, S.V (1949): Sidiachie chelovecheskie figurki v skulpture aleutov (Seated human figures in Aleut sculpture), *Sbornik muzeia antropologii i etnografii*, 12:195-212.
- Kaepler, A.L. (2011): *Holophusicon - The Leverian Museum*, ZFK Publishers, Altenstadt
- King, J.C.H. (1981): *Artificial Curiosities from the Northwest Coast of America*. British Museum Publications, London, pp. 48-49.
- Liapunova, R.G. (1985): Golovnye ubory aleutov v sobranii MAE (Aleut headdresses in the collections of the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography), *Kul'tura narodov Amerikii, Sbornik muzeia antropologii i etnografii*, 40:4-49.



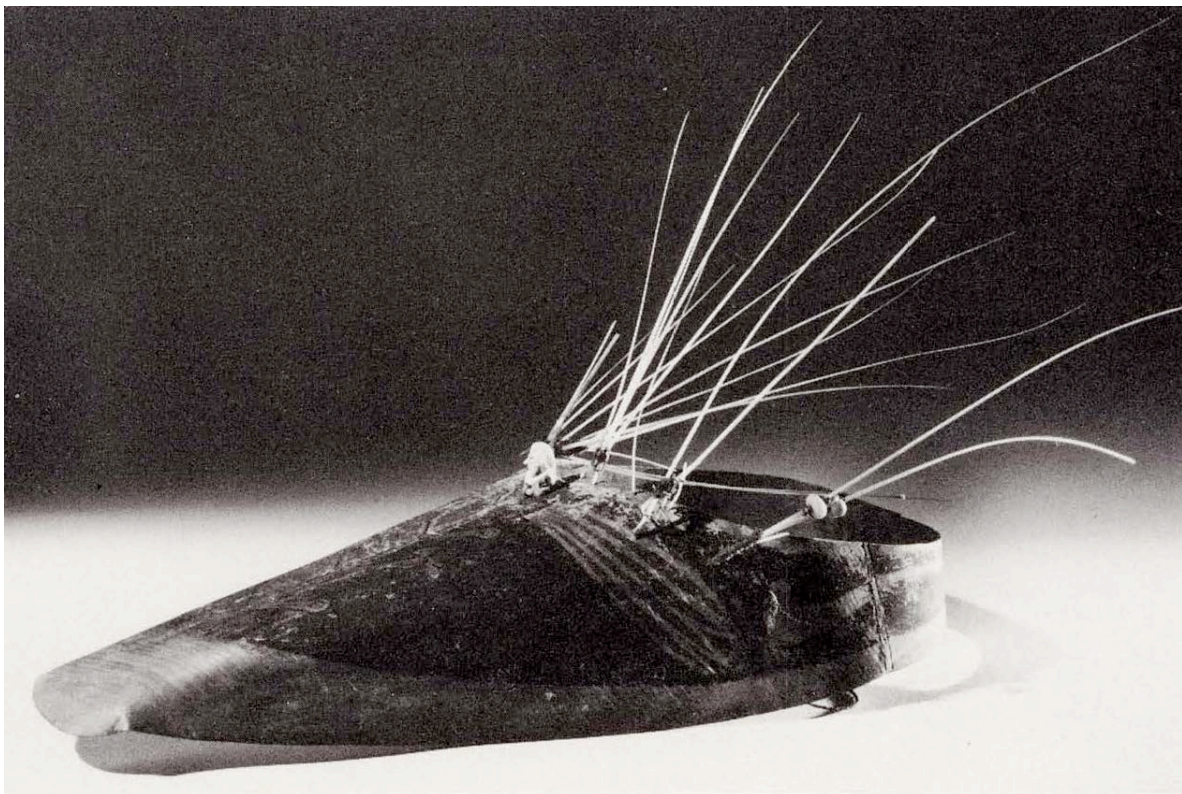
**MAE 2868-23 (see Ivanov, 1949)**



**MAE 4104-3**



**Engraving for plate 48 of the "Atlas" to Cook's Third Voyage**



**BM NWC 3 (visor shown in engraving above)**



**MAE 4104-4**



**MAE 4104-5**



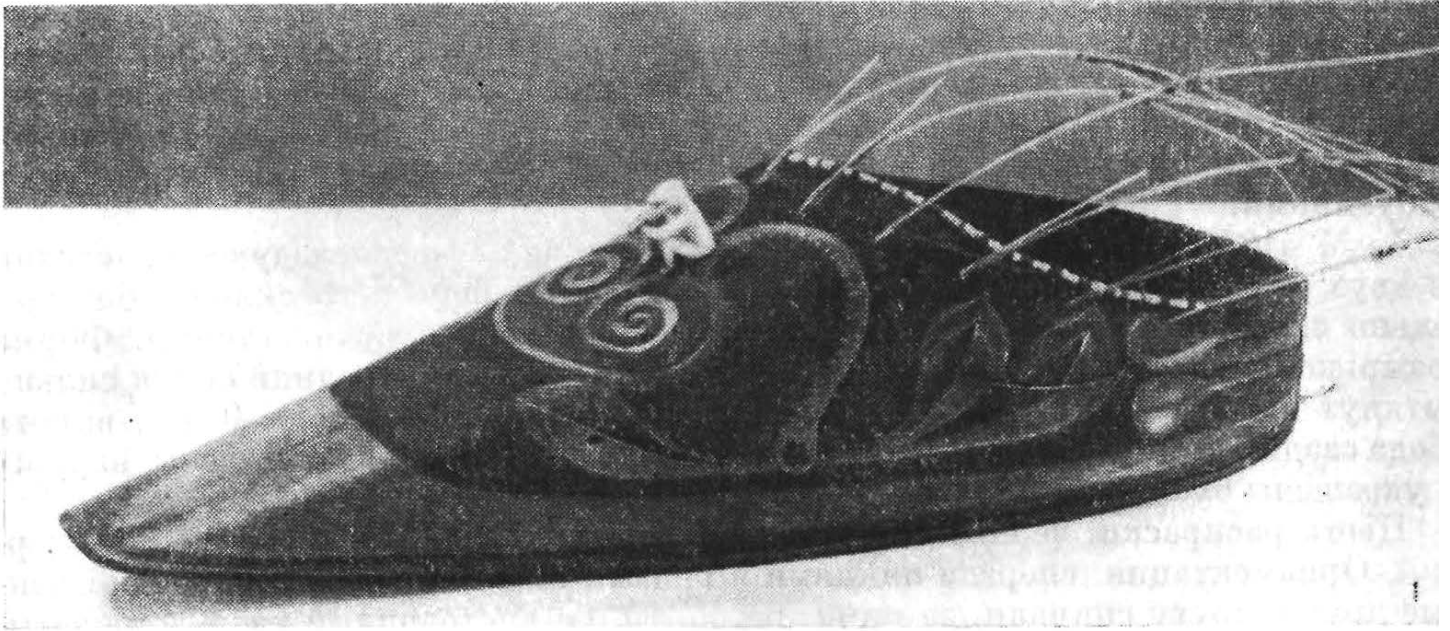
**von Asch collection**



**BM 2236**



**BM 2327**



**MAE 4104-2 (from Liapunova, 1985)**



**Alutiiq Museum, Kodiak, Alaska (Myrtle Olsen Collection, AM 603:1)**