

CARVED HUMAN FIGURES FROM ST. LAWRENCE ISLAND, ALASKA

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INTRODUCTION

The University of Alaska Museum possesses a large collection of Eskimo carved human figures from St. Lawrence Island, Alaska, most of which were obtained by Mr. Otto Geist during collecting trips to the island in 1926 and 1927. A few are archaeological specimens excavated from the Kukulik midden by University of Alaska expeditions from 1931 to 1935 under the direction of Mr. Geist (Geist and Rainey, 1936). All classify as contemporary figures, for the archaeological specimens are from the modern culture phase at Kukulik, which dates mostly in the 19th century (Geist and Rainey, 1936, p. 225).

A representative selection of carved figures from this collection forms the basis for this discussion and these have been divided into five groups on the basis of style, with a sixth group containing those figures that do not readily fit into any of the others.¹

DESCRIPTION

Group one consists of nine wooden figures. Although technique and carving skill vary considerably, all are thought to be the work of one man.

No. 1-1927-496 is a doll, 30 cm. high, made from a natural driftwood crook (Pl. 1-B: right). The face is pear-shaped, with the nose, eyes and mouth indicated in some detail. The arms are held close to the body and the legs straddled for carrying the doll around the neck in the way that St. Lawrence mothers carry their children.

No. 1-1927-495 is another doll, also made from a single piece of driftwood; it is 23 cm. high (Pl. 1-B: left). This specimen shows a much more skillful treatment of the face: the head is rounded naturalistically and the ears are indicated. The molded cheeks, forehead and open mouth give the face a sense of character. Except for the head, the figure is rather crude.

No. 1-1927-492 depicts a woman seated on a low stool or perhaps a toilet (Pl. 1-A: 4). The entire figure, which is 13.5 cm. high, shows careful workmanship; the facial detail is extremely naturalistic.

Perhaps the finest of this naturalistic group of wood carvings is that of an old woman, 11 cm. high, depicted as being slightly stooped, with knees bent and hands resting on the back (Pl. 2-A: 2). This stooped position as well as the sagging breasts and abdomen and drawn face suggest old age. Short knife strokes appear plainly on this specimen, there having been no attempt to smooth over the surface. The rough exterior seems to enhance the realism of the carving.

Almost as well carved and equally as realistic as the two preceding figures is the carving of a short, almost dwarfed man with a distended abdomen and large head (1-1927-491). The figure, which is 13.5 cm. high, has short arms and large feet that are out of proportion to the rest of the body. Again a roughened exterior finish adds to the grotesque nature of the representation (Pl. 1-A: 1).

No. 1-1927-512 is a large bust about one-half life-size (Pl. 2-B). The arms are folded across the abdomen, whereas the features, skillfully carved and

¹The author wishes to thank Mr. Geist for his assistance during the preparation of this paper. The photographs were taken by Mr. Richard Smith.

amazingly realistic, show the mouth drawn apart in a grimace, a facial characteristic of several of the figures in this group. The bust is made of a single piece of wood carefully smoothed and polished.

An hexagonal wooden plate, measuring 16.5 cm. across and with two concentric circles carved in relief in the center, has a grotesque human form clinging to one side and looking over the edge (Pl. 1-A:3). Both the hands and the feet of the figure show on the rim of the plate.

The remaining three carvings in group one represent women holding their children. Shamans carved such figures and prescribed them for use as charms by barren women who wished to have children. The first of these (1-1927-494) depicts a woman seated and feeding her child, who is seen taking masticated food from the mother's mouth (Pl. 2-A:4). This carving, though realistic, is inferior in workmanship to most of the specimens previously described. It is 6 cm. high.

The second figure (M-2001) is a woman in a half-reclining position giving birth to a child whose head protrudes from her abdomen (Pl. 2-A:3). The woman's face suggests the agony of childbirth but the rest of the figure shows rather crude carving. The arms of this figure, which is 5 cm. high, have been broken off above the elbows.

The third of these so-called fertility figures (1-1927-490) shows a woman on her knees holding her child level with her own head; she is about to feed it from her mouth (Pl. 2-A:1). The rough surface of the carving again creates the impression of grotesqueness that characterizes many of these figures. This trait shows particularly in the woman's head, which in addition tilts at an impossible angle. The figure measures 14 cm.

A carved figure in the possession of Mr. Otto Geist has definite affinities with the figures belonging to group one (Pl. 1-A:2). It measures 14 cm. across with a shape like a mask, but the suspension ring on the top suggests that it was meant to be hung. Mr. Geist informs the author that the carving hung on the wall of a St. Lawrence Island house and was fed blubber during the whale hunting season to insure a successful hunt. This figure may be the work of the same individual who carved those previously described.

The figures comprising the second group consist of two doll cutouts of bark (1-1935-1973; 1-1933-8442-G). One is of birch bark, the other of an unidentified coniferous bark. Both are extremely crude; they were probably used as playthings by small children (Pl. 3, 11, 15).

The three figures in group three have flat bases, oval and oblong bodies, and rather crudely carved heads (1-1926-683; 1-1926-926; 1-1926-681). Two are of ivory and one of stone; all closely resemble bird figurines from the modern period on St. Lawrence Island (Geist and Rainey, 1936, Pl. 25, 12-16) and from many other Eskimo archaeological and ethnographic collections. One of the ivory specimens has rows of tiny perforations over the rounded back, and both have holes drilled through the tail end near the base for threading on a cord (Pl. 3, 3, 10). The single stone specimen has crude features carved on the back of the head (Pl. 3, 6). Today on St. Lawrence Island, such figures are used in playing a game in which the player tosses up a handful of these figures and scores points for those which fall on their side (Geist and Rainey, 1936, p. 112).

Nine figures, all of ivory, form a fourth group because most of them show the human form depicted in some detail and the figures themselves engaging in some activity.

No. 1-1939-410 shows a woman with her hands on her knees and a child standing on her shoulder (Pl. 3, 2). The carving is good except for the faces, which are crudely indicated. The child is also somewhat out of proportion.

An unnumbered specimen is a man holding one arm over his head in a throwing position. The carving is good, with some attempt to show muscles in the chest and arms (Pl. 3, 5). Another unnumbered figure depicts an individual with legs apart and hands held over the stomach. The eyes and mouth of this specimen are small perforations inset with minute pieces of baleen (Pl. 3, 14).

No. 1-1926-804 is a squatting figure with elbows resting on its knees (Pl. 3, 7). Again the eye and mouth openings are inset with baleen. A figure wearing a

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parka is more crudely carved than most of the others in this group (1-1939-412). The line of the parka hood is clearly visible around the face, but the features are crude and the arms crudely indicated (Pl. 3, 4).

Different from all the figures in this group is a stylized representation of a mother with a child on her back (1-1939-261). Here the carver makes no attempt to be realistic (Pl. 3, 1). The mother is obviously seated but the legs come together to form a rectangular base which allows the figure to sit upright. Neither mother nor child has arms or realistic facial detail. The child is placed on the mother's back in such a way as to blend into the total composition. These facts are indicative of an earlier, more sophisticated period of Eskimo carving and this figure may not be contemporary with the others under discussion.

Perhaps the most unusual figure in this group shows a person with crossed legs, holding out its arms as if in supplication (1-1926-806). It holds one arm out straight with the palms of the hand up, but bends the other at the elbow as if it were carrying something. Small insets for eyes and mouth are characteristic of this figure (Pl. 3, 12).

No. 1-1926-1208-G shows a woman feeding her child in the same manner as that of the wooden figure previously described, and illustrated in Plate 2-A: 4. The carving is quite good considering the small size of the specimen; a piece of food protrudes from the mother's mouth (Pl. 3, 9). No. 1-1926-811 depicts a seated figure with legs straight out and without arms or features (Pl. 3, 8).

These last two figures are said to have been used as dolls; girls kept them in small bags for playing house. It is likely that most of the other figures in this group served the same purpose.

The fifth group consists of figures that are more crude and unrealistic than are those previously described. Five carvings are nothing more than block-like torsos with crude necks and heads, with no features indicated (1-1935-7770; 1-1934-8049; 1-1933-8395-G; 1-1935-4971; 1-1933-8440-G). Two are made of wood and two of ivory; the great range in size is noteworthy (Pl. 4, 6, 13, 15-16). On St. Lawrence Island such carved figures are kept with other religious paraphernalia for use at particular ceremonies in connection with whaling. The figures are considered to be the property of whaling captains and are "fed with blubber during the ceremonies preceding a whale hunt and then are destroyed by fire" (Geist and Rainey, 1936, p. 123).

Three figures, one of wood and two of ivory, that may have served the same purpose as those just described are unique in that they all have broad-brimmed head coverings (1-1933-8403-G; 1-1933-8331-G; no number) (Pl. 4, 1, 2, 14). Perhaps these represent an attempt on the part of the carver to carve representations of white sailors, for there is a tradition for such representations on St. Lawrence Island (Geist and Rainey, 1936, Pl. 32, 9-11).

The last four figures in this group, all of ivory, resemble those already described, but crudely carved breasts on all of them give the only indication of sex that exists for any of the figures in this group (1-1935-8770; 1-1926-802; 1-1935-4986; 1-1933-8339-G). In addition, all have grotesque appendages extending from the head (Pl. 4, 3-5, 7). Most likely these are intended to show the method of hair dressing. The purpose for which these figures were intended is unknown, but again they may have been associated with the whaling cult or, as is perhaps more likely, were simply children's playthings.

The sixth and final group of human carvings to be discussed consists of those specimens which do not seem to fit into any of the other groups. One specimen (1-1926-817) is an ivory head fashioned to attach to a body of another material (Pl. 4, 12). The features are clear but rigid, and the face lacks the character that is sometimes seen in the faces of figures in group one.

Another ivory figure represents an Eskimo wearing armor made of walrus hide (1-1926-822). A big piece of hide is worn over the shoulders and behind the head to protect the wearer from attack from the rear (Pl. 4, 10). This figure has a square base, perhaps for insertion into a board. This would suggest its use in some sort of game.

Two other ivory carvings that also may have been used in games are either not intended as human figures at all or so stylized as to be completely unrecognizable (1-1926-765; 1-1927-2008) (Pl. 4, 8, 11).

The last figure in this group is armless, but shows the features and legs, one of which is missing; the specimen is of wood (1-1932-8351). This figure is distinctive because of a scratched cross that runs over the shoulders and under where the arms would ordinarily be (Pl. 3, 13). It may represent an amulet strap similar to those on dolls from the Thule culture sites in the central arctic (Mathiassen, 1927, I, Pl. 32, 7).

COMPARISON

The figures in group one are unique in Eskimo art for subject matter, but the skillful workmanship and naturalistic technique resembles that exhibited by the carved figures of two widely separated arctic peoples, the Koryak of northeastern Siberia and the Angmagssalik Eskimos of East Greenland.

Carved figures of wrestlers, drummers and other individuals represented in active poses are important in the Koryak artistic tradition (Jochleson, 1905-08, Figs. 166-172) and their close technical relationship to the St. Lawrence Island specimens is quite apparent. The carvings in group one stand apart from the rest of St. Lawrence Island carvings in technique and skill of execution; they probably represent an artistic tradition introduced to the island from the mainland of Asia at a fairly late date, probably after historic contact. The similarity between these carvings and the Koryak specimens seem to indicate the source of this tradition.

It would, of course, be difficult to trace any direct connection between the carvings of group one and those of the Angmagssalik Eskimos, and yet both show a careful workmanship and an emphasis on facial detail that are exceedingly rare in Eskimo human carvings. The Angmagssalik figures are carved wooden dolls (Mathiassen, 1933, Figs. 51, 52). There is no attempt at an accurate representation of the human body, but the smoothness of the carving and the tendency toward a naturalistic treatment of the face (particularly noticeable in Fig. 52 in Mathiassen's paper) recall the St. Lawrence Island specimens.

The two bark cutout dolls that make up the second group appear to conform generally to the tradition of crude, armless and featureless carving that characterizes most Eskimo dolls. Bark specimens seem to be lacking from most archaeological and ethnographic collections, but Mathiassen reports a baleen cutout similar to the illustrated bark specimens for the Maujan site in the central arctic (Mathiassen, 1927, I, Pl. 33, 10). The perishable nature of bark probably accounts for their absence from other archaeological collections.

The "bird" figures with human heads that comprise the third group are widely spread throughout the Eskimo area. In the eastern arctic they are reported ethnographically from the Egedesminde District in West Greenland, where Birket-Smith suggests that they may have been considered magic birds (Birket-Smith, 1924, p. 124). In the central arctic they are characteristic of the Iglulik Eskimos, who do not know the use of such figures in games (Mathiassen, 1928, p. 218); the Polar Eskimos, who use them in a sort of dice game (Boas, 1888, p. 26); and the Eskimos

of the Ungava District of Hudson Bay, who use them only as toys (Turner, 1894, p. 260). Mathiassen also reports "bird" figures with human heads for the Naujan site in Repulse Bay (Mathiassen, 1927, I, p. 260) and Boas mentions them as widespread throughout the central arctic (Boas, 1901, I, Fig. 81, c, d, e). Although bird figures themselves are fairly common in Alaskan Eskimo collections, specimens with human heads are reported only from St. Lawrence Island.

Because the realistic carving of human figures is generally rare in Eskimo art, it is difficult to find examples to compare with the naturalistic figures considered together as group four. In some respects, these carvings represent the same artistic tradition as the figures in group one. Isolated examples from various Eskimo collections resemble the figures in group four. A small ivory figure with movable limbs from the Egedesminde District of West Greenland (Birket-Smith, 1924, Fig. 107, p. 125) has one arm in a throwing position and appears to resemble the ivory figure illustrated in Plate 3, 5. A naturalistically carved ivory figure from the Thule District (Holtved, 1944, Pl. 40, 20) differs considerably from the rest of the human carvings from this area in its carefully modeled details and so compares with the figures in group four. Hooper (1884, opp. p. 110) describes and illustrates a small ivory carving from King Island that has arms, legs and features depicted in some detail, and Nelson illustrates a carving of an old man from the Cape Prince of Wales area with the arms and legs free (Nelson, 1899, XCIII, 4). Thus it appears that although the great majority of Eskimo carvings in human form are crude and stylized, there have been attempts in widely separated areas to portray the human figure naturalistically and in active poses. It might also be mentioned that figures wearing parka hoods similar to the one illustrated in Plate 3, 4 occur frequently throughout the arctic (Holtved, 1944, Pl. 40, 24, 27; Mathiassen, 1934, Pl. 1, 19; Hawkes, 1916, Pl. XXXIV, b; Boas, 1888, p. 571; Jochelson, 1905-08, Fig. 174).

The typical Eskimo doll, featureless with a flat face and no arms, does not appear in this collection, but the tradition is perpetuated in the block-like figures which comprise group five. As already mentioned, some of these at least were used at particular ceremonies in connection with whaling; these seem to be restricted entirely to St. Lawrence Island (Geist and Rainey, 1936, Pls. 25, 21; 32, 8; Nelson, 1899, Pl. XCIII, 8). Specimens of this type that are definitely female (Pl. 4, 3-5, 7), and which may also have been used in connection with the whaling ceremonies, have appendages extending from the head that probably indicate the method of hair dressing. The tendency to indicate hair arrangement is a common characteristic in the representation of human figures from Greenland and is often the only way of determining the sex of a particular human carving from this area (Larsen, 1938, Pl. 3, 20; Birket-Smith, 1924, Fig. 17, p. 58; Holtved, 1944, Pl. 40; Mathiassen, 1934, Pl. 7, 1-3; Thomsen, 1917, Pl. XXV, I; Larsen, 1934, Pl. 8, 21). The Greenland hair arrangement is always in the shape of a bun on top of the head; a single carved head from the Punuk period on St. Lawrence

Island (Collins, 1937, Pl. 83, 14), shows such an arrangement. In recent times throughout most of Alaska women have parted their hair in the middle and allowed it to hang in braids or gathered it in a mass behind the ear (Nelson, 1899, pp. 57-58). It seems likely that the appendages projecting from the heads of the female figures in group five represent such hair arrangements.

Two of the miscellaneous figures in group six show some interesting features. Dolls with amulet straps similar to the one in Plate 3, 13 occur in various regions in West Greenland (Holtved, 1944, Pl. 40, 8; Mathiassen, 1930, Pl. 18, 14; 1931, p. 105), for the Angmagssalik Eskimos of East Greenland (Holm, 1887, Pl. VII), from Naujan and other central Eskimo sites (Mathiassen, 1927, I, Pl. 32, 7; Pl. 57, 15), and from the Punuk period on St. Lawrence Island (Collins, 1937, Pl. 83, 12-13).

The identification of Plate 4, 10 as a figure wearing armor made of walrus hide derives from information supplied by Mr. Geist; Jochelson illustrates two Koryak warriors dressed for battle and wearing similar armor (Jochelson, 1905-08, Pl. 29, Fig. 1). An ivory figure from the Thule District, already described in another connection, has a collar-like arrangement around its neck that could represent armor (Holtved, 1944, Pl. 40, 20).

In summary, this paper has attempted to describe an ethnographic and recent archaeological collection of Eskimo carved human figures, most of which differ stylistically from much of Eskimo art in this form. The comparisons show that many Eskimo groups do have some tradition for naturalistic carving, although usually its expression has been submerged by a cruder, stylized tradition that is more common. As far as St. Lawrence Island is concerned, this naturalistic tendency, developed to its fullest extent in the figures of group one and reflected in those of group four, seems to represent an elaboration of techniques more common to the people of northeast Asia, from whence it spread to the island in fairly recent times.

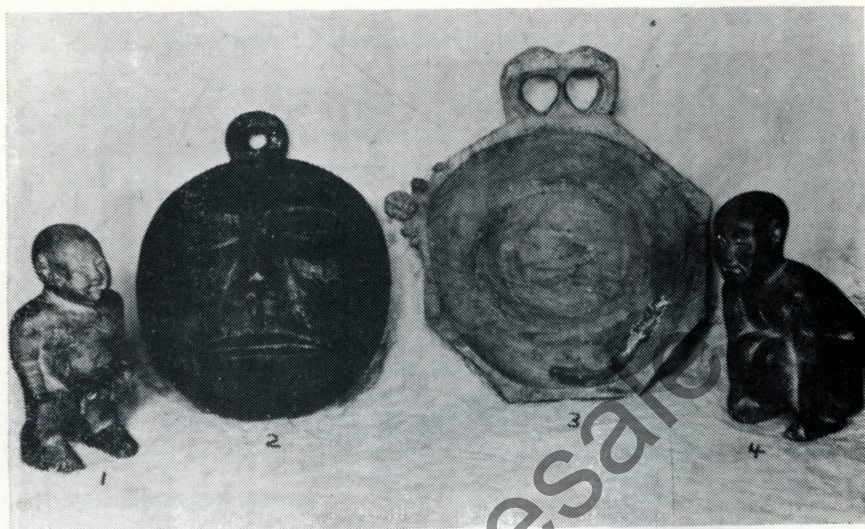
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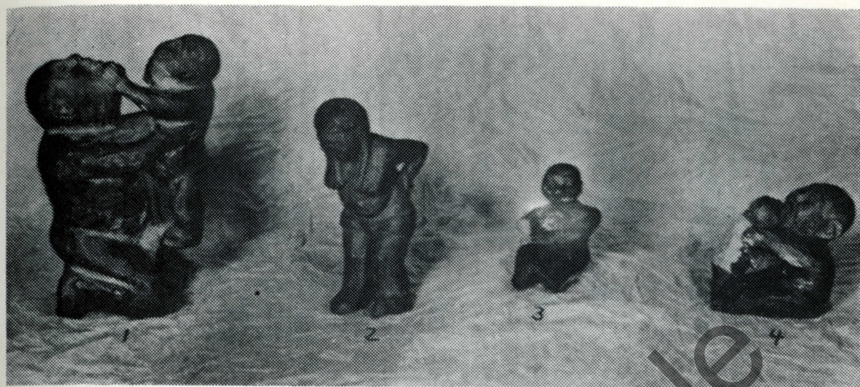
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Plate 1: Human figures from St. Lawrence Island



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Plate 2: Human figures from St. Lawrence Island



Plate 3: Human Figures from St. Lawrence Island



Plate 4: Human figures from St. Lawrence Island