



Halibut Hook

Unknown Tlingit artist
ca. 1830-1860

L: 11"; W: 2"; D: 4.5"

T0546

<https://collections.fenimoreart.org/objects/1243/halibut-hook?ctx=999e2fb64575fd4015c883ef56d2c18e36054d76&idx=0>

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When asked to select an object from the Thaw Collection to research during the Otsego Workshop, I first looked through the collections catalogue for objects from my own community. However, I found that all of the Navajo materials were either currently on display or had already been researched. Lacking cultural context for the rest of the collections forced me to navigate uncomfortable territory; a challenge that is inescapable for museum professionals working to catalogue collections in order to make material culture in museums accessible to source communities.

Hoping to select an “object of everyday life” so that my learning experience at Otsego might not offend the person who made it, the people who used it over generations, or the living communities who might continue to have a connection with it, I selected a Tlingit fishing hook. However, as I began to study the hook it defied neat museological categories: daily life, art, technology, the sacred.

This type of fishing hook is specifically designed to catch halibut. Halibut are large “flatfish” that swim parallel to the ocean floor and once mature, feature both eyes on the top side of its body. Halibut can weigh up to 500 pounds, but Tlingit fishermen typically catch halibut of between 20-100 lbs. due to the design of the hook. [1]

This V-shaped hook is made of two pieces of wood bound together by commercial twine. The two halves are carved of two different types of wood with varying levels of buoyancy. When dropped in water, the undecorated half floats above the decorated half, such that the sharp barb angles down toward the ocean floor where halibut swim. The lighter wood is yellow cedar and shows the teeth marks of halibut that were once snagged by it. The more dense wood is yew, which is carved with figures. An iron barb replaces the traditional bone barb and is secured to the hook with spruce root. The carving shows a hybrid image of a four-legged creature, perhaps a wolf or land otter identified by its bushy tail, and a halibut identified by its lined fins and fish-like tail [Figure 1]. The hook additionally has two human faces carved along the spine of the composite animal, which may represent the souls of the two animals rather than actual humans. [2] The presence of figural imagery suggests the spiritual qualities associated with halibut fishing in particular, since salmon hooks are noticeably undecorated in contrast.

Aldona Jonaitis, art historian of Northwest Coast material culture, posits, “halibut fishing has a cultural significance to the Tlingit which transcends its importance as a means of acquiring a food.”[3] Jonaitis suggests, halibut hooks should be viewed as an act that transcends the secular and sacred worlds, “one, the secure realm of the village and its environs; the other, the far less secure and potentially hazardous external realm beyond human settlement.” [4] The act of ocean fishing for halibut, in contrast to river fishing for salmon, places the fisherman in a dangerous space beyond Tlingit society and in peril of ocean swells. [5] Typical carvings feature animals that traverse multiple worlds, as the fisherman does on his journey, such as the land otter, raven, and devilfish. [6] This hook is unusual in that it may feature a wolf, which is a clan symbol.

Without consultation with Indigenous communities, close study, and comparative research, it might have been possible to suggest this object be categorized as art, for its figural qualities, or technology for its subsistence purpose. However, a recent conversation between members of the Thunderbird Clan of the Tlingit in Alaska and the Andover Newton Theological School in Massachusetts, highlights the challenges of placing Native American material culture into neat museological categories. The clan is requesting that another halibut hook carved with a wolf clan spirit be repatriated, because it may be *at.óow*. Rosita Worl of the Tlingit tribe explains, “Some clans haven’t had what we call ‘*at.óow*’ -- they’re clan ceremonial objects, and they haven’t been able to participate in our ceremonies”. [7] This halibut hook highlights the complexities of museological work and repatriation categories, as well as the importance of making all objects in museums accessible to source communities regardless of their presumed anthropological or artistic qualities.

Cite as: Mach, Stephanie. “Halibut Hook (T0546).” *Otsego Institute Alumni Review* Vol 7. (2019) [<https://www.theotsegoinstitute.org/uploads/1/3/9/6/139631595/mach.pdf>].

[1] Malindine, J. *Northwest Coast Halibut Hooks: an Evolving Tradition of Form, Function, and Fishing*. Human Ecology, 2017. pg. 1.

[2] Jonaitis, A. *Tlingit Halibut Hooks: An Analysis of the Visual Symbols of a Rite of Passage*. American Museum of Natural History, New York, 1981. pg. 29.

[3] Jonaitis 1981: pg. 2.

[4] *ibid.*

[5] Jonaitis 1981: pg. 4.

[6] Malindine 2017: pg. 2.

[7] *What A Native American Fish Hook's Journey Says About A Little-Known Repatriation Law*, March 4, 2016. < <https://www.wbur.org/artery/2016/03/04/what-a-sacred-native-american-hooks-journeytells-us-about-a-little-known-repatriation-law>>

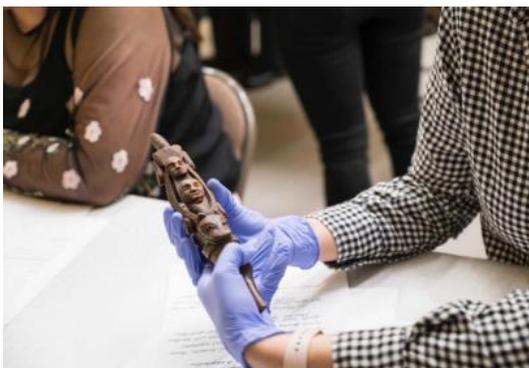


Figure 1. Halibut hook with a hybrid four-legged animal and halibut with two human faces carved along the spine