

Beak — Cug'eq

KUM'AGYAM CUGAA IPEGTAARTUQ. – AN EAGLE'S BEAK IS ALWAYS SHARP.

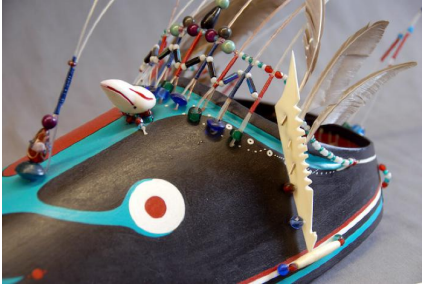


Photo: An ivory bird carving decorates a bentwood hunting visor, by Jacob Simeonoff. KANA collection. AM56.2.

Elders recall that every Alutiiq hunter had at least two helping animal spirits, one for land hunting and one for sea hunting. These spirits provided luck and assistance and were frequently birds. The frequent use of bird imagery in Alutiiq art symbolizes this guiding relationship.

Beaks and other bird images are commonly found on Alutiiq masks and hunting hats, objects that symbolize spiritual communication and transformation. Alutiiq people believe that every being has a human consciousness, a person inside that can show itself. Many of the masks once used to ritually conjure and honor spirits had beak-like mouths on an otherwise human face. These beak features suggest that the masks were images of birds unveiling their human-like spirit. The feathers that surround many mask faces may also symbolize this process.

The ivory carvings attached to Alutiiq bentwood hunting hats also commonly depicted the heads, beaks, eyes, and wings of birds. Like masks, these ornate hats were a means of transformation.

They helped the wearer become a magical being with the ability to kill sea mammals. The story of a boy who became an eagle illustrates this connection between birds and sea mammal hunting. The boy traveled to the land of the eagle, where he became an eagle by putting on an eagle skin. He was then able to capture whales and carry them home to feed his village.