

WC 8401021
War Club
Eastern Sioux, c. 1800-1820

War clubs of this “gunstock type” were in widespread use south and west of the Upper Great Lakes; metal blades were often attached after their introduction by the fur trade in the eighteenth century. The decoration by means of chip-carving on this club is well-known on wooden utensils from the Minnesota region in the early nineteenth century; opinions are divided on an Eastern Sioux or Chippewa identity of this art form. In the discussion of a wooden fan in this collection (WC 8401020) most of the examples have been listed, indicating the exclusive popularity of chip-carving among the Eastern Sioux. Moreover, early war clubs other than those of the Eastern Sioux usually have a central ridge on both sides of the handle, whereas Eastern Sioux examples are flat as in this case.

The symbolic character of the carved decoration includes on both sides a row of three Thunderbirds above the long tailed Underwater Panther, referring to the spiritual powers of Sky and Earth. On one side is a war record referring to seven human figures, of which six are without heads, i.e. killed. Three of these figures represent women, indicated by their breasts; the four other are men, showing their genitals. This conventional indication of sex is essentially the same as pictured on the aforementioned wooden fan.

For a long time this club was assumed to have been in the collection of Duke Paul von Wurttemberg. The earliest reference to this club was a detailed and fairly accurate line drawing, said to have been found in a sketchbook of Duke Paul, who gathered a large collection of Indian artifacts during his travels in North America during the period 1822-1856. It was assumed that this club had been in his collection, which was dispersed shortly after his death in 1860 (Krickeberg, 1954, p. 167). However, the club was neither mentioned in the early lists of the Duke’s collection, nor in any of the museums which acquired parts of this collection. Moreover, the sketch of the club was not in the Duke’s sketchbook, but was one of several separate sketches, which may have been part of the Duke’s collection (Klann, 1999, p.30). Thus it may be that Duke Paul saw the club somewhere, made the sketch because he liked it, but never owned the object.

Klann made this reasonable suggestion because in 1823, the Duke visited the private museum of Governor William Clark in St. Louis, and he was impressed by what he saw there. Clarke presented the Duke with a pipe and pipe-bag (Krickeberg, 1954; p.8); part of Clark’s collection survives in the Peabody Museum in Cambridge, Mass., but the greater part of this collection disappeared after Clark’s death in 1838 (McLaughlin, 2003; p. 70).

In 1978, this club appeared at a relic show in Cincinnati; shortly before, it had been discovered in a local bar. The feather decoration showing in the early sketch was no longer there. The club changed hands several times before appearing at Sotheby’s auction in October 22, 1983, as lot 211.

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Peterborough, Ontario
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References:

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