

NC 0044

Hunting Bow

Northwest Coast, ca. 1800-1860

Yew wood

51" L x 2 1/4" W

Certainly one of the finest wooden bows to have been made on the Northwest Coast, this example is difficult to attribute to a specific tribal group or location. Though the general appearance of hunting bows is fairly similar in different areas of the coast, the range of widths and back-surface embellishments differ the most from one example to another. This bow is most likely from the British Columbia coast, from Vancouver Island to the Queen Charlotte archipelago. Pacific Yew (*Taxus brevifolia*) is a rare coniferous tree that requires special growing conditions, and is not found very far north of Ketchikan, Alaska. Yews seldom grow straight and tall, and are very commonly gnarled and twisted, so finding a straight-grained section for bow making is very difficult. Bow-makers are said to prefer the outer section of straight branches, employing the tightest-grained, most alive and resilient wood of the individual tree. Yew is easy to work when green, though quite hard when it dries. It is known for being fairly unstable and prone to warpage when green, but settles down to a tough, resilient, and very springy characteristic when seasoned.

This bow is exceptionally straight and very highly refined in all the subtle shapes, valleys, and curves that make up its undulating, sensual form. Like a finely made Northwest Coast canoe paddle, the shape of this bow's back (outside) is composed of very subtle transitions from bulging forms to hollowed valleys, and the bow's belly (inside) has been carved with three very precisely formed parallel grooves. These grooves appear similar to the fluted front surface of certain Tlingit steel daggers from the early historic period. Very fine knife-marks show across the grain of the belly grooves, evidence of some of the careful refinement that the maker employed in its creation. The back of the bow has been smoothed and polished to a lustrous surface.

A few Tlingit examples of bow shapes in this form are very exaggerated in size, up to nine feet in length. These are sometimes made of spruce or yellow-cedar, and often decorated with painted back surfaces and sculptural additions in the form of animal or human heads on the ends. Such large bows were perhaps originally made as spiritual weapons, to be used in shamanic encounters with malevolent spirits (see Wardwell, 1997). Certain of these large examples can be seen in historic photographs made on ceremonial occasions, which depict them being carried as dancing staffs.

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