

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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**April Artifacts of the Month:  
Stone Tools**

SITKA – The Sheldon Jackson Museum April artifacts of the month are three stone tools including a Northwest coast zoomorphic maul head, an adze blade, and a hammer (I.A.427, I.A.761, and II.X.142). The maul head and the adze blade were collected in Southeast Alaska; the origins of the hammer are unknown. These tools, along with the wedge, were among the most important stone implements of the Northwest coast. Though relatively plain, all three offer fascinating insight into how earlier peoples lived, innovatively interacted with their surroundings, and developed new technologies as they adapted local raw materials to meet their needs.



Stone tools, I.A.427, I.A.761, and II.X.142

Stone has historically been of tremendous import to Northwest Coast peoples. Stone provided the anchor for the dug-out canoe, the weight for the fish-net, and the sinker for the halibut hook on its long line. It was used as the pile driver to pound wooden stakes into the river bed to make a fish trap. For hunting and food processing, stone could be fashioned into spear and arrow tips, harpoon blades, and knives. When flat, stone was used for abraders and whetstones to keep tools sharp. Hollowed out, stone could be used for bowls for food or lamps for heat and light or as mortars for grinding pigments for painting or adorning the body or embellishing clothing and textiles.

Depending upon its size and toughness and how it was pecked, beveled, flaked or sculpted, in the repertoire of tools, stone provided nearly infinite possibilities. In the Northwest Coast region, stone tools were used for altering and re-fashioning other natural resources, particularly cedar, and contributed to the development of a major woodworking industry wherever the tree grew. The woodworker used stone to make boxes, fishing and hunting gear, tools, canoes, and more for his family's daily use. If he was a master carver or specialist, the woodworker used stone to make items commissioned for a specific purpose or ceremonies. Because they were so heavily reliant on objects made of wood, a well-rounded knowledge of the art of woodworking and the tools to do it, especially stone tools like the maul, adze, and hammer were an absolute necessity among Northwest Coast men.<sup>1</sup>

A hammer-like tool, mauls were gripped in the fist or lashed to a haft and used to pound wedges into the length of a cedar log to split off large planks. The tedious and painstaking process of making a maul involved pecking and grinding techniques. First, a natural stone of appropriate size would be selected, then its shape would be roughed out and continually refined until it was ground smooth and finished off by rubbing with a piece of oiled hide till smooth. The top and bottom of this maul are relatively flat, indicating both ends may have potentially been used.<sup>2</sup> It is made from a brownish grey stone with yellow mottling, possibly soil residue and has a center girdled by a wide groove. The larger end has four chips missing; the other end, smaller in circumference, has two shallow grooves running perpendicular to the lashing groove. Mauls were most frequently used along the southern coast but grooved and perforated mauls were found only in the north among Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian.

Of all the tools used in the region of the Northwest Coast, especially during the last 2,000 years, the adze was the most important because it was used for working wood, chopping wapiti antler, and large sea mammal bones. Adzes were usually made from nephrite because the stone was tough and could be shaped to a bevel and re-sharpened on a grinding stone or abradar. The three main varieties of the tool were the D-adze, elbow adze, and straight adze.

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<sup>1</sup> The woodworker used stone to make boxes, fishing and hunting gear, tools, canoes, and much more for his family's daily use and additionally, if a master carver or specialist, items commissioned for a specific purpose or ceremonies.

<sup>2</sup> Some mauls have conical tops or nipple-like tops. Grooved-top mauls are the least common variety.

The D-adze was named for the shape of the haft to which it attached and was used only by woodworkers from Vancouver southward for finer work and finishing. The most universal of adzes, the elbow adze, had a slightly wider blade than the D-adze and when fitted with a heavy duty blade, was used for rough work; and for shaping and carving when outfitted with a smaller blade. Straight adzes were usually used for cutting or carving in deep crevices and were similar to the D-adze, except the blade was aligned with the knuckles instead of being set off and had a knuckle guard of leather or wood. Smaller adze blades were used for shaping and planing.

Adzes varied in size, thickness, and bevel due to the different functions they performed in the wood working industry. This adze blade is dark and brownish-grey and based upon its size, was likely used for heavy duty work. It has a bi-facially beveled bit –a sloping away from the horizontal surface on two sides. The blade is chipped from the bit to butt and another chip is missing from the butt. A single groove for lashing is located approximately one inch from one end.<sup>3</sup> Made from a tough stone, an adze blade like this would have been set onto a handle or haft cut from a bough or branch from a hard wood tree and lashed with wetted sinew or spruce root. Once the wet sinew tied to the grooved area dried, it would become very taut, securing the blade in place.

The hammer, perhaps the most recent of the three tools, has a stone head and a heavy bone handle. The two components are lashed together with heavy slightly tanned leather through a neatly cut hole in the handle. Hammer stones were selected for their shape, hardness and resistance to cracking or chipping. Unmodified, an oval hammer stone could be grasped in the hand, either end used for pounding. All Northwest Coast peoples originally used the hand maul held directly in the hand but in more contemporaneous times, northern peoples, the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian, devised hafted mauls, stone heads lashed onto a haft, like this one. Many of the hammer stones or hafted mauls came to be sculpted with bird or animal figures, possibly representative of the woodworker's spirit helper.

Stone tools are less susceptible to destruction than bones and generally offer the best evidence of where and when humans lived, their geographic dispersal, and ability to survive in a variety of habitats. A variety of stone tools including whetstones, abraders, chisels, mauls, hammer stones, scrapers, projectile points, sinker and anchor stones, flaked knives, and much more may be seen at the Sheldon Jackson Museum. These tools will be on view until April 30<sup>th</sup>. During winter hours, the museum is open from 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday. Discounted winter admission is \$3. Visitors 18 years of age and younger, Friends of the Sheldon Jackson Museum and those with passes are admitted free of charge.

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<sup>3</sup> Grooved adze were a distinctly different kind of adze used by Northern coast people. The grooved adze was not at all found in southern coastal areas.

Stewart, Hillary. *Cedar: Tree of Life of Life to the Northwest Coast Indians*. Seattle: University of Washington Press. 1984

Stewart, Hillary. *Indian Artifacts of the Northwest Coast*. Seattle: University of Washington Press. 1975

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