



Necklace (Lei Niho Palaoa)

Date

early 19th Century

Medium

Hair, fiber and walrus ivory

Description

Worn by both men and women of the aristocratic and chiefly classes on ceremonial occasions and during battles, this quintessential Hawaiian necklace was second in importance only to feather work cloaks and headpieces. As they were an important adornment in the 19th Century they were also memorialized in artwork, as many Hawaiian chiefs chose to be painted while wearing them. Interestingly, the Hawaiian name for the necklaces, lei niho palaoa, directly translates to whale tooth necklace,

and is not technically correct for this example which has been proven by scientific analysis to be made from walrus tusk. In the early years of the 1800s American and European whalers began bringing both walrus tusks and whale teeth to barter with Hawaiians, but even before this trade, the pendants were made from other materials such as shell and coral. It is uncertain exactly what the pendant represents, but various hypotheses have included a ceremonial fishhook seen on some Polynesian Islands, an abstraction of a human head with an extended tongue, and a vessel for mana, one's life force. The second theory might explain the use of braided, bundled hair as a cord, another means by which this necklace sets itself apart from other lei niho palaoa. Here we see that the necklace is bound in a total of twenty places as opposed to the usual two or four. This likely represents a specific genealogical lineage.

Dimensions

11 1/4 × 7 7/8 × 2 1/2 in. (28.6 × 20 × 6.4 cm)