

WC 8702018
War Club
Southwestern Ojibwa? C. 1770-1800

A war club, 24.5 inches, 62 cm., carved from a single piece of maple wood. The flat handle increases in width toward the ball. Above this ball, the edge of the curved handle is carved in a row of sharp indentations. The handgrip terminates in a slanted butt. Engraved on one side of the handle are thirty-one human figures, of which only eleven have heads,

Acquired from Alexander Gallery in 1987.

In early colonial times, war clubs of this general type were fairly common from the Atlantic coast west to the Missouri River. Several details of this example indicate an origin from the northwestern parts of this distribution area. The delineation of the human figures, all with their legs bent in the same direction, is similar to the pictures on Ojibwa bark scrolls. Most probably, this is a record of a war party of which only eleven returned alive.

The notched edge above the ball may be an abstract reference to the long-tailed animal often carved at that location on many ball head war clubs. Facing the enemy, this effigy represents the dragon-like ruler of the underworld. In its reduction to the spikes on the dragon's back, the carving has been noticed on several ancient clubs from the Midwest.

After the introduction of metal tomahawks and firearms, lightweight versions of these clubs survived as ornamental dance accessories. The size and weight of this example are convincing evidence that we are dealing here with a genuine weapon. This function as well as the masterly carving suggests an origin from the late 18th century.

This war club is almost identical to a club now in the Canadian Museum of Civilization, Cat. Nr.III-X-236, illustrated in Brasser, 1976, p.81. Of unknown tribal origin, the later came from an early collection in the Georg-August University in Gottingen, Germany.

Drs. T.J. Brasser
Peterborough, Ontario
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Literature:

Brasser, T.J., Bo'jou Neejee! Profiles of Canadian Indian Art. National Museum of Man, Ottawa, 1976.

Stolpe, H., Collected Essays in Ornamental Art. Stockholm, 1924.