

RESEARCH PAPER

Dolphins at the British Museum: Zoomorphic Calusa Sinkers

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The subject of everyday or “mundane” artistic expression in Native American material culture does not always take into account the idea that aesthetic design can have explicit practical as well as decorative function. This article explores this idea through objects from the Floridian archaeological collections at the British Museum.

In 2000 Denis Dutton deconstructed the idea that non-European indigenous peoples; what he described as “small-scale non-literate societies” (2000: 217), “Don’t have our concept of art”. In the article, Dutton explored the various “rules” used to define art, concluding that artistic skill, practiced as a form of inducing pleasure, is something universal to human society. He made a distinction however between “art and artistic performances bracketed off from ordinary life”, such as religious or political works and “mundane artistic objects”, everyday practical tools which feature aesthetic design elements (2000: 235).

Dutton’s article critiques the notion that aesthetics and functionality are disconnected elements of design. This is an issue which has repeatedly featured during my ethnographic fieldwork with Native American artists, who expect that non-Natives such as myself will not understand the relationship between their artworks: consciously conceived, designed,

created and sold within the context of the contemporary art market, and ancestral practical objects, such as delicately carved fish-hooks from the North Pacific (**Fig. 1**) scarred by halibut teeth from their use as fishing equipment; the “mundane artistic objects” of Dutton’s conception.

The artists consider their works to be no different from the material culture of the past, created in every respect to efficiently fulfil a social function and that in Native American interpretations of material culture a separation between practical requirement and aesthetic beauty is manifestly false.

This theoretical study examines a number of objects from the British Museum’s Floridian archaeological collection to attempt



Figure 1: Am9820. ©Trustees of the British Museum.

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to explore how aesthetic design techniques can be deliberately incorporated in practical objects to improve their functionality. These collections were mostly gathered in the cheerfully *ad hoc* manner of the late Victorian era, including the Marco collection, a Floridian assemblage excavated by Lieutenant Colonel C. D. Durnford.

The Durnford Marco collection is important because it contains a number of rare wooden objects associated with an ancient ritual centre. Durnford was not an archaeologist but a retired officer in the British Army. In 1895, while holidaying with his wife in Naples, Florida on a tarpon-fishing expedition, Durnford learned that wooden artefacts had been dredged up at Marco, the large island that marks the western end of the Ten Thousand Islands.

Seizing the opportunity to indulge his intellectual curiosity, Durnford sailed to Marco and began to dig. His findings were small, but included botanical specimens like

this small wooden plank (**Fig. 2**), later identified as one side from a wooden box, as well as an almost intact wooden bowl carefully carved with shark tooth implements (**Fig. 3**).

He also excavated less beautiful but no less interesting items probably made from palm fibres. These include a short section of fibre rope, a net originally woven in diamond pattern, a succession of small pegs tied to one another, and a bivalve shell with a hole bored through it (**Fig. 4**).

Durnford took great care with his small collection, recognising that to expose it to the Florida sun might rapidly destroy it. He placed the objects under seawater, maintaining this condition for several weeks until his arrival in Philadelphia. There he displayed the assemblage at the University of Pennsylvania, sparking a rush of interest in the potential of the Marco finds to reveal information about the historical cultures of Southern Florida, particularly in the context of the “Mound Builder” theories of the time, to which Durnford was an adherent.

These held that the original inhabitants of the region which became the Southern United States were inhabited by a mysterious civilisation to whom objects regarded as sophisticated or beautiful, such as those Durnford discovered, were attributed. These people were believed to have disappeared suddenly sometime pre-European contact (Durnford, 1895: 1032).



Figures 2 & 3: Am 1895,0717.12, 1. ©Trustees of the British Museum.



Figure 4: Am 1895,0717.2, 8, 9, 11. ©Trustees of the British Museum.

In reality, the Marco site is connected to the Calusa, a hierarchical state supported by extensive coastal fishing which flourished in the period 800–1500 C.E. Calusa nobility, centred on their capital at what is now known as Charlotte Harbor, some 50 miles north of the Ten Thousand Islands, could command considerable military strength and their trade and tribute networks stretched throughout Southern Florida. Their religious life, as recorded by early Spanish chroniclers, was highly colourful and musical, featuring elaborate masking ceremonies and large choirs. European influence was, as almost everywhere else in the Americas, devastating to the Calusa, with catastrophic mortality from disease coupled with slaving raids which saw whole communities depopulated. By the 1740s the Calusa of Southern Florida were gone. (Marquandt, 1987). The material culture evidence is uncertain as to whether Marco was a Calusa centre or one inhabited by a people in tribute to and influenced by them (Walker, 2000: 26).

Durnford knew nothing of the Calusa, a history of whom was not published until 1910, but he recognised the value of his finds. He donated them to the British Museum and published an article announcing his discoveries in *American Naturalist*. By the time the article was printed, excitement in Philadelphia at his collection had led to the organisation of a large-scale expedition to Marco under the American archaeologist Frank Cushing and funded by Phoebe Hearst. Cushing conducted an intensive excavation of a wide area of Marco close to the region in which Durnford had dug, uncovering many hundreds of perishable artefacts, including bowls, boxes and masks, many of which are unique to the site (Cushing, 1896; Gilliland, 1989). So eclectic was the collection, so removed from the grave assemblages Cushing and his contemporaries were used to excavating, that it was considered that Marco was a cultural and/or religious centre buried in the mud by a sudden natural disaster – most likely a hurricane (Snapp, 1994: 13).

What Cushing's discoveries allowed was for a better understanding of the assorted items Durnford had excavated. Comparison with Cushing's far more extensive finds reveal that the netting, pegs, rope and bivalve shells formed a connected assemblage from a particular object: a gill net (Gilliland, 1975; Walker, 1992; Snapp, 1994). The diamond-pattern netting formed the body of the net, the thicker cord its fringes, the pegs the floats which stretched the net to the surface of the water and the holed shell a sinker that kept the net flush with the bottom. This net, when installed in shallow coastal waters could catch fish in considerable numbers (Fig. 5).

Cushing's death choking on a fishbone in 1900 brought official exploration on Marco to a halt, but he was not however the only person interested in the finds. In 1904, fresh from explorations in Northern Florida, the steamboat *Gopher*, commanded by Clarence Bloomfield Moore arrived off the Ten Thousand Islands. Moore was a freelance American archaeologist viewed as an eccentric; a contemporary noted that "Dr. Moore has a fad. And he can't seem to get over it. His fad is hunting for Indian relics, and he's

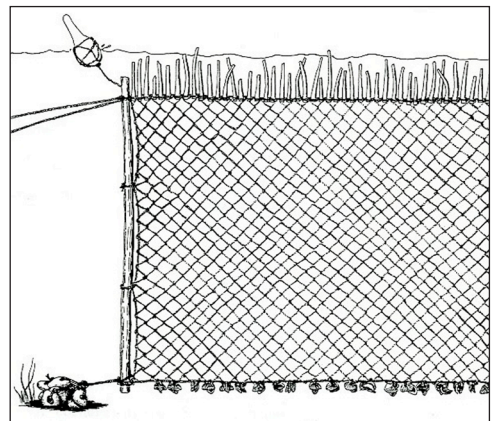


Figure 5: Art by Merald Clark, courtesy of the Florida Museum of Natural History (Walker, 1992: 297). Note that the shells depicted here are *Noetia ponderosa*, not the related *Dinocardium gigantea* from the Durnford collection.

chased them from coast to coast . . . as long as he's alive I suppose he'll keep right on at the same old game. He's rich enough, so I shan't stop him." (Mitchem, 1999: 15)

Moore was eager to uncover further ritual sites containing preserved wooden artefacts, and began exploring first Marco and then other keys among the complex archipelago. Unlike the conscientious amateurism of Durnford or the new-fangled professional archaeology of Cushing, Moore was careless with his attributions and methods, and it may therefore be a blessing that he was to be disappointed. He did not locate another buried ritual centre, but he did find evidence throughout the islands of centuries of continual habitation by fishing peoples.

The collections Moore gathered cannot not be reassembled coherently, in part because so much is now unaccounted for but also because his record keeping was so poor. Many objects have no better provenance than "The Ten Thousand Islands". Others are annotated with locations unknown on any map or are from named keys without more specific data as to the context in which they were found, whether from burial mounds, beach sites or other targets of his curiosity.

The majority of the objects donated to the British Museum by Moore he described as pendants. These are a wide array of small carefully shaped items carved from shell, limestone or coral. None are more than a few centimetres long and all have one narrow notched end. Some of the pendants are narrow and twisted, following the inner spiral of the shell of a horse conch; *Pleuroploca*

gigantea. Others are globular or cylindrical in appearance. Some appeared to have been hardly modified at all, their natural wave formed appearance only augmented by the notches (Figs. 6–7). It is easy to see why Moore considered them as personal adornment; they are highly attractive pieces, the carver using the natural swirl, texture and colouration of the material in their composition.

Carving these works would have been simple and relatively quick work for a skilled carver and their ubiquity in the coastal archaeological contexts in which Moore found them suggests that he may have been wrong in considering them pendants. Other scholars have suggested instead that that they are sinkers (Gilliland, 1975: 229), used perhaps in much the same fashion as the bivalve shell from the Durnford collection, or as hook and line plummets; Moore himself noted the possibility that they were sinkers but considered that "some are too handsomely made to have served a utilitarian purpose" (Mitcham, 1999: 359). In a summary of the debate, Karen J. Walker considers that the shell examples are sinkers, but notes that "the pendant argument may be a valid one for some finely finished, effigy or stone specimens made of exotic material" (2000: 31), she goes on to note moreover that "wearing sinkers as pendants does not preclude an original or even primary function as a fishing implement" (2000: 38)

These simple weights, attached to the fibre nets used to catch inshore fish to weigh them down and sift the larger fish from coastal lagoons and creeks, or as part of the tackle



Figures 6 & 7: Am 1907,0614.64, 82, 94, 92, 81, 71, 61. ©Trustees of the British Museum.

required to line-catch larger fish, would have been regularly lost though the natural movements of wave, wind and time. Unlike the Marco material these dispersed finds were probably not lost in one cataclysm, but instead are the by-products of centuries of aquaculture on the Southwestern Florida coast.

It is here that I return to Dutton's consideration of "mundane artistic objects". While most of the sinkers are attractive pieces, and it is likely that their shapes held meaning for the fishermen who made them, they are on the whole not easily identifiable with any direct analogue.

However there are two sinkers from the collections Moore made in the Ten Thousand Islands, unhelpfully without a more precise provenance, which indicate that there was more to the creation of these sinkers than simply practical functionality. Moore records the presence of duck-shaped sinkers during his excavations on Marco (Mitcham, 1999: 359), but I believe that some of the sinkers he gave to the British Museum are depictions of sea creatures.

The first, carved from coral, is relatively poorly defined without any surface detail, but the arched curve of its cylindrical shape, tapering at one end and notched at the other brings to mind a leaping fish (**Fig. 8**). Many fish in Floridian waters jump, including mullet which spring from the water in great shoals, particularly when under threat from marine predators. Mullet are to this day a common target of gill-net fishermen in Southern Florida (Walker 1992: 297), and mullet are among the species recorded

in archaeological surveys of Marco (Walker 2000: 35). Larger possibilities include the sturgeon, whose jumps can cause serious injury to incautious humans, and in deeper waters there is Florida's most popular game fish and a state symbol, the marlin. Neither marlin nor sturgeon would have been the target of the relatively lightweight gill-nets, but perhaps the intention was not to depict the fishermen's prey, but a rival hunter.

The second sinker illustrates this idea more directly (**Fig. 9**). It is clearly a dolphin, carved from limestone, with the notched tail curving around as the animal leaps from the water. The dorsal fin is clearly depicted, as is its bottle-nose and at the front tiny indentations mark the jaws. It is known that the Calusa hunted dolphin; dolphin remains have been found at sites in the Ten Thousand Islands (Widmer, 1988: 247), but it is certain that gill-nets and lines were not dolphin hunting equipment. Such a fast and powerful animal would have rapidly shredded such an obstacle in its path.

Pierre Lemonnier's study *Mundane Objects* demonstrates that an object need not have decorative qualities to hold ideological significance (2012), but when these qualities are present understanding the maker's intentions can be complex and involve an element of supposition. In an attempt to explain the presence of these zoomorphic sinkers through an analogue I will turn to an example from indigenous cultures of the North Pacific Coast.

The tribes of the Northern part of the coast, in what is today Southern Alaska and British



Figure 8: Am 1907,0614.89. ©Trustees of the British Museum.



Figure 9: Am 1907,0614.90. ©Trustees of the British Museum.

Columbia, produced many items of fishing equipment carved with zoomorphic or anthropomorphic figures, including fish-hooks and fish traps as well as wooden clubs for stunning large fish as they were hauled into their canoes (Stewart, 1977: 52–53, 62, 116). These clubs, such as this one from the British Museum's collection, were often carved in the shape of sea lions, voracious and successful fishers with whom the fishermen of the North Pacific competed for food (**Fig. 10**).

The anthropologist Norman Feder once wrote in a study of Native American art that everyday objects were decorated in an aesthetically pleasing manner because “man everywhere seems to enjoy having beautiful things around him” (1971: 8). Although palpably true, this observation is limited because it fails to explore the notion that art and aesthetics are not necessarily an optional extra incorporated to brighten someone's day, but are instead integral parts of a fully-functional piece of equipment. Haida artist Bill Reid adapts this point, noting that “To devote such care to an object designed for brutal but necessary tasks, perhaps shows some respect for the animal whose death it's required to bring about” (Holm & Reid 1975: 15)

This train of thought was taken further by the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, who used a similar North Pacific fish club in his book *The Savage Mind* to explore the idea that “everything about this implement – which is also a superb work of art – seems to

be a matter of structure: its mythical symbolism as well as its practical function . . . seems to be inextricably bound up with each other” (1966 [1962]: 22–26). For Lévi-Strauss the designs on the club are not only aesthetically pleasing, but an essential component of its functionality as an efficient tool.

So it is with the zoomorphic dolphin sinkers. The carvers of these objects were not, I contend, making them because they were pretty. The sinkers spent their working lives under water, in the silt and sand of the channels of the Ten Thousand Islands. They were not made beautiful so that people could stare at them, they were made to evoke and connect with the apex hunter of the Florida coast, the graceful, agile and – to a fish – deadly bottlenose dolphin. Indigenous Floridian fishermen, living in a society whose survival and prosperity depended on their professional skills, would have seen the dolphin as both competition and inspiration, and by carving net sinkers in the shape of their aquatic rivals they were perhaps attempting to impart a little of the strength and ability of the dolphin into their own efforts. Just as Cushing's discoveries at the Marco ritual centre provides insight into the “art and artistic performances bracketed off from ordinary life” of the social elite, these simple zoomorphic figures allow a brief glimpse into “mundane artistic objects” of the fishermen on whose labour their society principally depended.

These zoomorphic sinkers, lost on the shores of the Ten Thousand Islands hundreds of years ago, dug up by an eccentric relic-hunter and kept in a British Museum warehouse provide insight into the everyday rituals of the fishermen who made them and present an intriguing picture of the connections between art, aesthetics and functionality in Precolumbian Florida.

Competing Interests

The author is a Collaborative Doctoral Student, jointly supervised by the British Museum and University College London. Some contributory research for this paper was undertaken during previous employment with the British Museum.



Figure 10: Am 1949,22.96. ©Trustees of the British Museum.

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