

Aim, Swing, Throw

Throwing Board, Unidentified Iñupiaq or Yup'ik Artist



Unidentified Iñupiaq or Yup'ik Artist. *Throwing Board*. Early 20th century. Alaska, United States. Wood, walrus ivory, pigment. 19 11/16 in. (50 cm). The Baltimore Museum of Art: John Erikson Collection, BMA 1955.167.5

This tool is for hunting. How do you think it is used?

Throwing boards, also called *atlatl* (*AHT-laht-l*) and spear throwers, have been used by hunters for centuries and across regions, including present-day Europe, South America, Asia, and Alaska, where this throwing board was made. This board was likely created for commercial sale, but it replicates those used by Iñupiaq (*ih-NYOO-pee-ak*) and Yup'ik (*YOO-pik*) people. The carving depicts seals and beluga whales, animals a hunter might have searched for. The designs on throwing boards are created to honor and attract animals to the hunter.

While guns have become common and important hunting tools, some Iñupiaq and Yup'ik hunters continue to use throwing boards and darts for seal hunting. A throwing board helps a person throw a spear or dart toward prey with great speed and accuracy. The hunter, in a role reserved for Iñupiaq and Yup'ik men, rests his spear in a shallow groove on the throwing board. The groove on this board is on the reverse side of what is pictured here. The hunter holds the wooden handle with one hand, placing his forefinger in the hole. Next, he swings his arm in an overhand or sidearm throwing motion, propelling the spear forward. The board essentially extends the length of his arm, adding tremendous force to the throw. Accuracy comes with practice. Throwing boards are made specifically for the individuals using them.

Classroom Activities

- In life and after death, prey animals are deeply respected by Iñupiaq and Yup'ik people. They honor animals by using every part of their bodies, wasting as little as possible. Meat is used for food, skin for clothing, and blubber for oil in lamps, cooking, and eating. Break the students into small groups and have them brainstorm ways in which your classroom can be less wasteful. Ask for a volunteer in each group to be the scribe and share their group's ideas with the class.
- Iñupiaq and Yup'ik throwing boards feature animals native to their regions. Ask students to research animals that live in your area. Invite students to choose one of these animals to carve into a bar of soap. Once soap carvings are complete, ask the class to group animals by habitat.
- Check out this soap carving tutorial:
[#MetKids—How to Make a Soap Carving](#)
- Ivory soap is a great inexpensive, soft soap option for soap sculptures.

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Throwing Board (Detail), Unidentified Iṅupiaq or Yup'ik Artist

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Throwing Board in Action

A seal hunter demonstrates how to use a throwing board while seated in a model kayak. The spear has already been launched and his arms are in the final throwing position.

Seal Hunter, 2009. Photo by Travis S., CC BY-NC 2.



Cultural Regions of Alaska

Map by Climate.gov, adapted for BMA use.