

## **Bear Carving**

Carved wooden bears have become synonymous with Ainu art. The figures capture the animal in dynamic poses, such as poised to catch salmon or balanced on tree logs with mouth open mid-roar. While they are skillful examples of Ainu woodcarving techniques, they are also symbolic of the hardships faced by Ainu as growing numbers of Wajin (ethnic Japanese) moved to Hokkaido in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In Ainu spirituality, bears are considered the manifestation of *kimunkamuy*, the spirit-deity of the mountains. As with all sacred animals, they were traditionally depicted only as abstract motifs to decorate offering sticks, ceremonial headdresses, and other items used for ritual purposes. It was believed that naturalistic depictions of these animals could be possessed by evil *kamuy* (spirit-deities) and cause harm. However, Ainu began carving bears for sale in the early 1900s as a means to make a living.

As Hokkaido became increasingly settled by Wajin in the nineteenth century, Ainu ancestral land was requisitioned, and Ainu were banned from hunting and fishing which they relied on to support themselves. Some people left the area to find work; others tried to make ends meet by selling handcrafted items to tourists. Woodcarvers initially sold everyday items, such as chopsticks, trays, and plates, but diversified into ornamental figures as tourism developed.