



*Bear Sculpture, c. 16th century*  
Pawtucket

Peabody Essex Museum  
Salem in History, 2006

## Bear Sculpture, 16th century

Pawtucket  
Salem, MA  
Basalt  
Gift of Beara Eaton  
E50296



### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This stone sculpture of a bear was discovered in what is now Salem, Massachusetts, in 1830 during excavation for a house foundation. It was most likely sculpted by a Pawtucket artist before the early 1600s. At that time, Native communities in the area began to suffer population decimation from diseases introduced by Europeans.

### ART HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The object features essential elements of form that allow the observer to identify the animal it represents, but it does not strictly adhere to an exact reproduction of a bear. This more general or broad interpretation may suggest an iconic view of the animal. This stone impression of a bear may relate to the idea of that animal as a protector or clan ancestor. For example, the name of Pessaconaway, leader of the Pennacook people, means “child of the bear.” There is also a known traditional story from New Great Britain that features a she-bear who cared for a lost child.

Though we cannot recover the exact context or meaning of this object, the maker’s care in patiently pecking stones against one another to sculpt this form out of basalt, a particularly hard stone, suggests its importance and value.

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### SAMPLE GUIDING QUESTIONS

- Describe this object. What does it represent? What is it made out of?
- What features of the animal did the artist include? Omit? Why do you think the maker of this object made these choices?
- This object is small (about 5 inches tall). Do you think it was put on view as many sculptures are today? Why or why not?
- Do you think this is a “portrait” of a bear, or a general representation of what a bear might represent to the artist? What kind of meanings might it have held for the artist?

### SUGGESTED LEARNING ACTIVITIES

- Compare this work with contemporary or modern sculpture, perhaps one that is on view locally. How do both objects use minimal form to suggest something about the subject?

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2003 Massachusetts History and Social Science Curriculum Frameworks: 5.6, 7.2, 7.3, 7.6