



Head-dress frontlet

On display

Title/Description: Head-dress frontlet

Object Type: Ornament

Materials: Abalone shell, Paint, Sinew, Wood

Measurements: h. 191 x w. 156 x d. 76 mm

Accession Number: 590

Historic Period: 19th century

Production Place: North America, Northwest Coast, The Americas

Cultural Group: Kaigani Haida

Credit Line: Purchased with support from Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1974

Among the most dramatic examples of crest art on the northern Northwest Coast was the chief's dancing head-dress. This consisted of a carved wooden frontlet of the kind shown here, which was attached to the front of a cylindrical framework of baleen strips. The framework, which enclosed a skin cap, was decorated with ermine pelts hanging at the sides and back and had a 'coronet' of sea lion whiskers and flicker feathers (see Holm, 1983: 18-24). These head-dresses considerably increased the stature of the wearer, male or female, and were worn on formal occasions, notably at potlatch gatherings, where all participants wished to emphasise their status and abundant resources. Ceremonies of welcome involved dances, and Niblack (1888:264) reports how costumed performers danced a welcome to their guests, and in doing so showered them in white eagle's down which had been placed for the purpose inside the frame-work of their head-dresses.

Besides the imposing impression created by these head-dresses, they were also significant because of the particular crest with which the frontlet part was carved. The creature portrayed here has many bear characteristics - curving claws, regular teeth and large, rounded ears. The original owner would have had the right to display the bear crest on his or her costume, for the display of crests was not random, but was linked to the clan to which an individual belonged and was justified by a mythical or historical event. Crests were intimately linked to status, and their display was a privilege. If an individual displayed crests to which he had no right, he was criticised, with resulting loss of prestige. The most eminent people had the right to display many crests, and these privileges were publicly validated at large-scale gatherings at which they acted as hosts.

This fine frontlet, probably carved from maple, is very thin and light in weight. Some of the abalone shell plates are glued-in replacements. The surviving original ones are tied on with sinew and appear to be old pendants which have been adapted for use as inlay. The left forepaw is a replacement.

Steven Hooper, 1997

Entry taken from *Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection, Vol. 2: Pacific, African and Native North American Art*, edited by Steven Hooper (Yale University Press, 1997) pp. 282-283.

TO-BE-REPLACED-WITH-A-GAP

Beautifully detailed frontlets, relief-carved with family crests such as bears and beavers, were the centrepieces of elaborate headdresses worn at potlatch ceremonies, often decorated with sea lion whiskers and ermine skins flowing down the wearer's back. Among the most important possessions of families on the Coast, these were heirlooms, passed down through the generations as markers of heritage and identity.

Exhibitions

'Empowering Art: Indigenous Creativity and Activism from North America's Northwest Coast',
Sainsbury Centre, Norwich, 12/3/23 - 30/7/23

Sacred Circles (Cat.298), Hayward Gallery, London Oct 1976 to Jan 1977

Provenance

According to the vendor James Economos it belonged to Son-i-hat, a chief of Kasaaan, Prince of Wales Island, towards the end of the nineteenth-century.

Purchased by the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia from James Economos, New York in 1974 out of funds provided by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury.
