



Head-dress frontlet

Not on display

Title/Description: Head-dress frontlet

Object Type: Ornament

Materials: Paint, Quill, Wood

Measurements: h. 160 x w. 85 x d. 85 mm

Accession Number: 627

Historic Period: Late 18th/early 19th century

Production Place: North America, Northwest Coast, The Americas

Cultural Group: Heiltsuk

Credit Line: Purchased with support from Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1975

This is a small and delicate frontlet in light wood which may date to the eighteenth century. It has no surrounding panels of abalone inlay, and relies for visual impact on paint (black, red and pale green, now faded) and on the boldly projecting beak of the bird.

This is identifiably a depiction of raven, who is often portrayed carrying a red object in his beak, standing for fire, or the box of daylight, that in a famous myth he is held to have introduced to humankind. There are numerous myths recounting the adventures of raven, a trickster who had the ability to transform himself into human and other forms. In this sculpture we have a reference to this human/bird quality in the hands which rest on the knees, giving the wings the appearance of a cloak, an image which occurs in Tsimshian myths about raven (Boas, 1916:60). Raven's body is carved as the face of another creature with a broad, toothed mouth. This is one of the conventions of Northwest Coast design, where a face can stand for a body, and eye forms can stand for the joints of wings or limbs.

This frontlet was once fixed at the base, neck and forehead to a head-dress framework, but only a few feather quills remain of its former embellishments. It has been broken and repaired at the neck.

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) p. 285.

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

'Elisabeth Frink: Humans and Other Animals', Sainsbury Centre, Norwich, 13/10/2018 - 24/2/2019

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

Provenance

Purchased by the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia from Peter Sharrer, New York in 1975 out of funds provided by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury.

