



## 'Chilkat' Robe

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**Not on display**

**Title/Description:** 'Chilkat' Robe

**Object Type:** Textile

**Materials:** Mountain-goat wool, Yellow cedar bark

**Measurements:** h. 1370 x w. 1727 x d. 40 mm

**Accession Number:** 667

**Historic Period:** Late 19th century

**Production Place:** North America, Northwest Coast, The Americas

**Cultural Group:** Chilkat, Tlingit

**Credit Line:** Purchased with support from Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1976

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This wonderful Tlingit naaxiin Chilkat robe is a ceremonial garment originating from the Chilkat people of the Tlingit Nation from the Northwest Coast of Canada. The robe is made from yellow cedar bark and mountain goat wool dyed with plant extracts and would have been woven by a woman. [1] It features a woven signature that may help us identify who made this remarkable ceremonial robe.

The design of this Chilkat robe is strikingly beautiful but is not purely decorative. The intricate design illustrates crest animals, as symbols of status and ancestry. They are important embodiments of a specific family's past history, present status and future destiny. In this case, the imagery relates to cultural stories involving the diving whale and the raven. [2] Such stories are integral to Northwest Coast culture, as is a connection to nature and activation through use and doing.

Chilkat robes remain important symbols of status in First Nations society, bound up with wealth and prestige. They are worn and danced in at potlatches, hung on grave houses containing the bones of deceased chiefs, laid on dead bodies during ceremonies and used to decorate the walls of clan houses.

This historic example was made in the late 19th century just as First Nation communities were subjected to a series of intolerable injustices associated with colonial history. Following the potlatch ban of 1885 the robe's use would have been outlawed. If they continued to be used, such items were confiscated by the authorities, which may have happened in this case. Otherwise many objects were surrendered as First Nation communities were coercively forced to relinquish them until the Potlatch ban ended in 1951.

This example ended up under the ownership of the Governor of Alaska before appearing at auction, where it was purchased by London antiquities dealer, John Hewett. He sold it to Robert and Lisa Sainsbury in 1977 and they donated it to the Sainsbury Centre in time for the Centre's opening the following year.

Calvin Winner, July 2020

[1] Steven Hooper (ed.), Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), (cat. 247), pp. 266-267.

[2] A "Chilkat blanket", Emily Brennan, Seminar Research Paper (unpublished), 2012, MA in the Arts of Africa, Oceania and the Americas, Sainsbury Research Unit, University of East Anglia.

TO-BE-REPLACED-WITH-A-GAP

This is a well-preserved example of a type of ceremonial robe which became popular throughout the northern Northwest Coast during the course of the nineteenth century. They are widely referred to as 'Chilkat blankets' because the women of the Chilkat Tlingit of the Lynn Canal area were the principal weavers, although they were also made in other places, and oral history relates that the form had its origin among the Tsimshian to the south. Samuel (1982) has made a detailed study of these blankets, especially of the technical aspects of production, which involved highly sophisticated twining and finger-weaving techniques.

Chilkat blanket designs were copied from a wood pattern board which had the design painted upon it. Thus many blankets share the same general design, and two which correspond to this one are illustrated in Boas [1] and Holm [2]. The central design panel on these blankets has been called the 'diving whale' pattern, based on an interpretation by Emmons. The 'whale' is viewed from above; the lower part of the design is said to be the whale's head with large eyes, the central face stands for its body, and the two upper eye forms and associated smaller elements are the flukes of the tail. The symmetrical side panels are difficult to interpret, and as no first-hand indigenous information seems to have been recorded in the nineteenth century, such design interpretations remain speculative.

The warp is of the twisted inner bark of the yellow cedar and the weft and fringes are of mountain-goat wool, which is white in its natural state. The colours were originally obtained from local dyes. When foreign dyes became available during the second half of the nineteenth century a pale blue/green (present here) was introduced into the colour scheme. The black areas on this blanket have sections which are dark brown and dark green, showing that local, as well as commercial, dyes have been used to produce the 'black'. The colours on the front are duller than those on the back, the result of exposure to light.

Samuel [3] estimates that six months of regular work was involved in the manufacture of a single blanket, and this was one factor which set this type of garment above and apart from trade blankets and other costumes. Chilkat blankets were regarded as great valuables and were not only worn by those of high status (men and women), but were also given as gifts to participants in ceremonial exchanges, notably potlatches. They were also used as funeral shrouds and decorations on grave houses — their destruction being an act of respect for the deceased and a sign of plentiful resources on the part of the owner.

When worn, the blanket was draped over the shoulders, and in dancing the arms were spread to achieve maximum impact for the design. During the second half of the nineteenth century, a full ceremonial costume for an eminent person on the northern Northwest Coast consisted of a Chilkat blanket, an apron, a crest hat or head-dress (no. 263) and a raven rattle (no. 260). The potlatch was the usual occasion for such elaborate attire. Dances were performed by hosts and visitors and there was often a strong competitive element in these encounters between kin. A splendid appearance, with many crests displayed, was one way to establish prestige and a high reputation.

Steven Hooper, 1997

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[1] F. Boas, 'Notes on the Blanket Designs', in Emmons, G.T. *The Chilkat Blanket* (Alaska: Friends of the Sheldon Jackson Museum 1907), fig. 564a.

[2] W. Holm, *The Box of Daylight: Northwest Coast Indian Art* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1983), no. 84.

[3] C. Samuel, *The Chilkat Dancing Blanket* (Washington: University of Washington Press, 1982), p. 25.

## Exhibitions

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

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## Further Reading

Abbott, H., Brown, S. Price, L. & Thurman, P. *The Spirit Within; Northwest coast Native Art from the John H. Hauberg Collection* (Seattle: Seattle Art Museum 1995)

Boas, F. 'Notes on the Blanket Designs'. In *The Chilkat Blanket*. Emmons, G.T. (Alaska: Friends of the Sheldon Jackson Museum 1907)

Dauenhauer, N. 'Tlingit At.óow: Traditions and Concepts', In *The Spirit Within; Northwest coast Native Art from the John H. Hauberg Collection* (Seattle: Seattle Art Museum, 1995)

Emmons, G.T. *The Chilkat Blanket* (Alaska: Friends of the Sheldon Jackson Museum, 1907)

Emmons, G.T. & De Laguna, F. *The Tlingit Indians* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991)

Holm, W. *The Box of Daylight: Northwest Coast Indian Art* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1983)

Jonaitis, A. *Art of the Northern Tlingit* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1986)

Samuel, C. *The Chilkat Dancing Blanket* (Washington: University of Washington Press, 1982)

Worl, R. *Celebration; Tlingit, Haida, Tsimshian Dancing on the Land* (Alaska: Sealaska Heritage Institute; University of Washington Press, 2008)

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## Provenance

This historic Chilkat Robe was made in the late 19th century just as First Nation communities were subjected to a series of intolerable injustices associated with colonial history. Following the potlatch ban of 1885 the robe's use would have been outlawed. If they continued to be used, such items were confiscated by the authorities, which may have happened in this case. Otherwise many objects were surrendered as First Nation communities were coercively forced to relinquish them until the Potlatch ban ended in 1951.

This example ended up under the ownership of the former Governor of Alaska, B. Frank Heintzleman (letter in Sainsbury Centre archive from K. J. [John] Hewett, dated December 8th, 1976). Where he obtained the Robe has not yet been ascertained. After which it appeared at auction (date to be confirmed) and was purchased by John Hewett, a London based antiquities dealer. He sold it to Robert and Lisa Sainsbury and the University in 1976.

Governor of Alaska, B. Frank Heintzleman (dates not verified).

K. J. [John] Hewett (believed to have been purchased at auction in 1976 - to be verified).

Purchased by the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1976 out of funds provided by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury.

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