



Rattle in raven form

On display

Title/Description: Rattle in raven form

Object Type: Musical instrument

Materials: Leather, Paint, Stone, Wood

Measurements: h. 318 x w. 100 x d. 120 mm

Accession Number: 831

Historic Period: Mid 19th century

Production Place: North America, Northwest Coast, The Americas

Cultural Group: Haida, Tlingit

Credit Line: Purchased with support from Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1982

Yáadu wé Yéil Sheishóox. Aaa, khúnáxh khut has jeewatee haa léelk'w hás. Yaa has khusgéiyin. Aaa, yáat'aa khu.aa, ldakát át ayaxh aadéi wooch xháni teeyi yé áyá. Aaa, ch'a tléix' tí áyá. Ch'a aan áwé, khu.oo yáxh yatee, wooch jín has awulshaadí.

Here is a Raven Rattle. Yes, our grandparents were very artistic. They were intelligent. Yes, this one, though, all of it is finely connected. Yes, it is one. Even so, it is like a community, as they are holding hands.

Ishmael Hope, August 2024

TO-BE-REPLACED-WITH-A-GAP

Rattles in the form of birds were used throughout the Northwest Coast. Some were collected during Cook's visit to the Nootka in 1778 (King, 1981 : pls. 49-51), and an example similar to this one was collected among the Tlingit in 1805 by Lisiansky (1814: pl. 1e; Siebert and Forman, 1967: 59,60). The bird most frequently depicted is the raven, as here, with a 'hawk' mask carved on its breast and a reclining figure on its back. This figure has its tongue extending into the beak of another bird, whose head forms the tail of the raven. The extended tongue occurs often in Northwest Coast art. In some cases it has sexual significance, but here it is likely to be connected with concepts of the tongue as the locus of life force; the acquisition of animal tongues and their associated spiritual power was a crucial part of a shaman's vision quest (see de Laguna, 1972: 676-80).

Raven rattles are popularly classified as chief's rattles, in contrast to shaman's rattles, which depict other kinds of bird. However, raven rattles have been found in shaman's graves (de Laguna, 1972: pls. 176, 187; Wardwell, 1978: no. 52), and reliable first-hand evidence for a firm classification is lacking, as indeed is information about the symbolic significance of the scenes carved on the backs of rattles. In the second half of the nineteenth century, raven rattles were part of the standard ceremonial accoutrements of chiefs throughout the northern coast, along with Chilkat blankets and dance head-dresses. However, this may reflect a change of emphasis, where the rattle's significance as a marker of high status superseded a former, shamanic, importance, about which we have little information.

This rattle is well preserved, and the figure, with its bear-like head and claws, is larger and more sculpturally accomplished than many other examples. Besides the Lisiansky rattle, which also retains its strong colours, this one is similar to an example collected among the Haida (probably in the 1870s) which is illustrated by Niblack (1888: pls. liii-iv).

Steven Hooper, 1997

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

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The iconic raven rattles are found all along the coast. Made from two halves of alder filled with small stones known as raven rocks and stitched together, they are carved with delicate figures of ravens and hawks, melded with red-bodied spirits of the forest. Used in the most important ceremonies by chieftains and shamans, their purpose was ceremonial and cultural, with far greater significance as catalysts for supernatural power than the simple noise they could produce.

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There is an atmospheric film, made for David Attenborough's BBC *Tribal Eye* series in 1975, of a Potlatch festival in the Northwest Coast area of North America. The flickering firelight reveals the build-up of tension, the crowds and noise, but most of all the immense range of riches on display in the ceremonies and dances in order for the host chief to demonstrate his generosity and power. This rattle is a chief's ceremonial instrument for such an occasion, shaken rhythmically to accompany ritual movements. It is brightly coloured and takes the form of the body of a raven, the trickster-performer creature who flies at the heart of many of the regional origin myths. Everywhere the rattle is moved, there is a creature pointing upwards or outwards. On his back is a bear-headed man, legs akimbo, his tongue held in the beak of a crested bird. The belly of the raven reveals a hook-nosed face, its forehead bearing the marks of two more bird-heads. For the mid-nineteenth-century Tlingit and Haida peoples, a member of which would have owned this, their powers were strongly intertwined with the forces of nature, which had to be controlled and appeased. The object epitomises the symbiotic yet wary relationships between humans, birds and animals.

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Veronika Secules, art historian and gallerist

Exhibitions

'Elisabeth Frink: Humans and Other Animals', Sainsbury Centre, Norwich, 13/10/2018 - 24/02/2019

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

Provenance

Formerly in the collection of James Hooper, no. 1455
