



Comb

On display**Title/Description:** Comb**Object Type:** Comb**Materials:** Caribou antler**Measurements:** h. 108 x w. 60 x d. 15 mm**Accession Number:** 875**Historic Period:** Late 18th century**Production Place:** Cross Sound, North America, Northwest Coast, The Americas**Cultural Group:** Tlingit**Credit Line:** Purchased with support from the Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Art Trust, 1983

The Vancouver voyage provenance of this fine comb makes it one of the earliest documented pieces to have been collected among the Tlingit. It is well preserved and the carving is noteworthy in that it exhibits the 'formline' design arrangement which is familiar from later nineteenth-century material. The term 'formline', coined by Holm in his analysis of the principles and techniques of Northwest Coast design (1965), refers to the broad uncarved band which here delineates the form of the wings, enclosing 'eyes' and other shapes which stand for joints and feathers.

The handle appears to represent a long-beaked bird, but the 'beak' has a proboscis-like quality usually associated with the representation of insects (suggestion courtesy of Carol Mayer). In addition, the face has humanoid features, so this is not a depiction of an ordinary bird, but a special one, possibly the mythical raven, famous throughout the coast, who was capable of transforming himself into many guises and whose exploits are recounted in numerous myths. According to myth, all creatures originally had a human form, before they donned skins and became animals. This comb could be interpreted as a depiction of raven in this transformational aspect, wearing his wings as if they were a cloak.

Combs were used as hair ornaments and carvings for display. They have also been found in shaman's kits with masks and other ritual items. [1] A further possible use for combs is suggested by the grooves across the base of the tines, which resemble friction marks. These also occur on wooden combs [2] and may have been caused by combing some rough material like the wool or cedar bark used in weaving.

Any outward extension of the 'beak' has apparently been prevented by the flatness of the antler, which for that reason cannot be elk, and is almost certainly caribou. Caribou do not occur in Tlingit territory and their antler and skins, excellent for clothing, were obtained by trade with the Athapaskan peoples of the interior. [3]

Steven Hooper, 1997

[1] A. Jonaitis, *Art of the Northern Tlingit*(Seattle,1986), pl. 66.

[2] Collins et al., *The Far North: Two thousand years of American Eskimo and Indian Art* (Washington, 1973), p. 226

[3] A. Krause, *The Tlingit Indians: results of a trip to the Northwest Coast of America and the Bering Straits* (Seattle: American Ethnological Society; Monograph 26, 1956), p. 127.

Exhibitions

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

Provenance

Collected in 1794 by Lieutenant Thomas James Dobson during Captain George Vancouver's voyage of the Pacific in H. M. S. Discovery between 1791-95.

Later acquired by John Gent of Devizes, Wiltshire.

Purchased by the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia from Sotheby's, London, lot. 61, on the advice of Robert Sainsbury in 1983 out of funds provided by the Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Art Trust.
