



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

Yáadu wé xéidu. Ldakát yá Lingít átx'i áwé yáa has du shuká a káwu áwé. Iyateen wé a waakh, kha wé a lú, kha wé a kích. Hél tsu khultuyáxh wáa sá yéi kwsigéink' áwé wé Lingít átx'i. Ch'a yeisú tle k'idéin a daa yéi s jeewanei. "Khut jeewatee" áyá yéi tusáakw nuch.[1] Waanghaneens áwé wé xéidu daat áwé kadulneek yáa Lingít tláagu teen. Khaagák'w Shaanák'w gíwé khaa jeet nateech. Aagháa áwé wé xéidu du éet awdishee. Laxhéitlxh du jeexh wusitee. Yéi áwé akawlineek a daat át wé Khaadashaan. Kaasxh'agweidíxh sitéeyin, Shx'at Khwáandáxh.

Here is a comb. All of Tlingit objects have their crest on it. You see its eyes, its beak, and its nose. It didn't matter how small the Tlingit objects were. They still worked well on it. "They lost their hands," is what we call someone who is artistic. Sometimes they tell about combs in ancient Tlingit stories. Maybe the Mouse Woman gives it to a person.[2] Then the comb helps him. It was blessings in his hands. That is what John Katishan told about. He was from the Kaasxh'agweidí clan, from the Shx'at Khwáan.[3]

Ishmael Hope, August 2024

References

[1] "Khut jeewatee," meaning "they are artistic," is a fine phrase from *Tlingit Verb Dictionary* by Constance Nais and Gillian Story (Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1973). In addition to that fine resource, I also regularly refer to *Dictionary of Tlingit* by Keri Eggleston (née Edwards; Sealaska

Heritage Institute, 2009).

[2] John Katishan, Khaadashaan told this story, in the form of traditional oratory, to John Swanton, who edited a text of the story and included it in *Tlingit Myths and Texts* (Bureau of American Ethnology, 1909).

[3] The Shx'at Khwáan are the people from the clans that come from the Stikine River, who settled in Khaachxhana.áak'w, what is now known as Wrangell.

TO-BE-REPLACED-WITH-A-GAP

King's Lynn-raised explorer George Vancouver sailed, from the age of fourteen, on two voyages with Captain Cook. From 1791 to 1795 Vancouver commanded HMS *Discovery* on an epic voyage ranging from Australia to the Northwest Coast of North America, where one of his officers collected this Tlingit comb at Cross Sound in what is now southern Alaska.

Made from traded caribou antler by a very skilled carver, this is one of the earliest documented pieces to have been collected from the Tlingit people.

The indigenous First Nations peoples of the Northwest Coast believed that animal spirits could transform themselves into people, and that shamans could control these powers for human use. Their art abounds in creatures (birds, bears, beavers, wolves) with humanoid features. The bird on the handle of this comb seems part mythic raven and part person.

—

Ian Collins, journalist and writer

TO-BE-REPLACED-WITH-A-GAP

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.

TO-BE-REPLACED-WITH-A-GAP

These combs, made from yew wood, ivory or bone, are carved in relief with the faces of the crest animals of stories and ancestry. More than combs, they are ornaments, worn in dances and ceremonies in the elaborate hairstyles traditionally worn by both men and women on the Northwest Coast, and are reflective of the network of relationships and connections, conduits to the spirits and the supernatural.

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.
