A494-AM,N-NW- Kwakwaka'wakw**–**Halibut Plaque**-20th century**





Figs. 1-2. Kwakwaka'wakw-**Halibut** Plaque**-20th century**

**Case no.: 8**

**Accession Number: A491**

**Formal Label:** Kwakwaka'wakw**–**Halibut Plaque**-20th century**

**Display Description:**

Kwakwaka'wakw spirituality is transmitted at ceremonies, mostly during the winter season. These ceremonies are often referred to as potlatches. They are mostly designed for the transference, justification, and reaffirmation of family and spiritual status inherited from primeval ancestors who contacted the spirit world and were given privileges from beings of a supernatural nature. These beings prefer honor, power, and magic through the gift of Tlugwe, which are supernatural treasures, often taking the physical form of masks and regalia, but also comprising stories, songs, recitations, dances, and other intangible performances. This halibut plaque may have been part of a Tlugwe.

Kwakwaka'wakw spirits, like those of other Northwest Coast peoples, can be divided into four separate spirit realms, including sky spirits, sea spirits of which the halibut is a participant, earth spirits, and otherworldly spirits. All four realms interact with one another, and human beings attempt to contact all four worlds and often channel their spirits at sacred ceremonies wherein dancers go into trances while wearing masks and other regalia associated with the spirit-world.

**LC Classification**: E99.K9

**Date or Time Horizon:** Late 20th century

**Geographical Area:** Fort Rupert, northeastern Vancouver Island.

**Map, GPS coordinates:** 50º41'51.16" N 127º25'32.09" W



Fig. 3. Map of Fort Rupert and the Kwakwaka'wakw Reserve. After www.bing.com

**Cultural Affiliation:** Kwakwaka'wakw, Kwagu’ł band living at Fort Rupert

**Media:** Wood, red and blue paint.

**Dimensions:** H 107.48 mm, 4.23 in; W 94.40 mm, 3.72 in

**Weight: 33 gm, 1 lb**

**Condition: original**

**Provenance:** artist

**Description:**

The Kwakwaka'wakw consider time as circular rather than linear. Making plaques to be given away or be destroyed so they can be made again is an example of looking at the past not as something completed but as part of a cycle of endless renewal.

Technically, the style and form of plaques changed in tandem with access to iron tools and supplies made available after contact with early Russian explorers and European settlers (Holm 1965: 5; Malin 1978: 13; Jonaitis 1991: 39, 54; Masco 1995: 42). Northwest Company and the Hudson Bay Trading Company, which built a trading post near Fort Rupert, in 1849 provided contact with other people. Metal carving tools were sharper and more efficient than their traditional counterparts, and modern synthetic paints allowed for more dramatic and durable coloration than did the plant and mineral based pigments previously used to decorate plaques (Jonaitis 1991: 39, 54).

However, the rôle of the past is still evident in the conservatism among some sculptors who refer to the plaques of the past in their work. In this respect, masks are highly valued by the Kwakwaka'wakw as manifestations of ancestral spirits and supernatural beings. These supernatural entities are embodied through dance performance (Greenville 1998: 14). However, Northwest Coast tribes vary in their use of different myths, they incorporate into plaques (Malin 1978: 47). Since each plaque and accompanying dance programs are “owned” by particular families and passed down by elders and chiefs to their immediate and extended families, they have a certain conservatism in their presentation in the potlatch and seasonal festivals, accruing histories that incrementally transform their meaning (Gosden and Marshall 1999: 172), which is reflected in the way sculptors create new masks based on these transformations (Malin 1978:18-19; Ostrowitz and Jonaitis 1991: 251).

These transformations have been facilitated by Fort Rupert on northeastern Vancouver Island, the traditional homeland of several bands of Kwak’wala speakers. The Kwagu’ł band living at Fort Rupert has been considered one of the highest-ranked bands, with illustrious lineage from myth time to the present and important chiefs. Their home is a site of strong traditional ceremonialism. In 1849, the Hudson's Bay Company established a trading fort there, thus promoting Fort Rupert as a center for commerce and as the most prominent village during the last half of the nineteenth century ideas for transforming plaques were freely flowing. George Hunt, of Tlingit and Scottish ancestry (his father was a factor at the fort) but raised in Kwakwaka’wakw traditions, collected valuable information and hundreds of utilitarian and ceremonial objects for museums beginning in the 1890s.

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