Case 8-A476-CAN-Vancouver Is-Kwakwaka'wakw Totem Pole-Thunderbird-Sea Bear-Halibut-1950

 

Figs. 1-4. CAN-Vancouver Is-Kwakwaka'wakw Totem Pole-Thunderbird-Sea Bear-Halibut-1950

**Case no.: 8**

**Accession Number: A476**

**Formal Label:** CAN-Vancouver Is-Kwakwaka'wakw Totem Pole-Thunderbird-Sea Bear-Halibut-1950

**Display Description:**

The Sea Bear is a Kwakwaka'wakw supernatural being from the undersea world. It corresponds in nature to the grizzly bear. In this totem pole the Sea Bear holds a halibut and is about ready to eat it. Above him is a Thunderbird, whose flapping wings have been likened to a thunder clap. In this totem pole the thunderclap would be associated also with the halibut’s slapping the water as the sea bear was pursuing it. Therefore, this totem pole is like a recorded message: the source of thunder is near. Beware!

owever, inthis context this thunderclap would have been associated with slapping of the halibut on the water’s surface,

**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

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

**Media:** Wood; navy blue, yellow, green and red paint.

**Dimensions:** H 49.21 cm, 19 3/8 in; W 44.1325 cm, 17 3/8 in

**Weight: 860 gm, 1 lb 14.25 oz**

**Condition: original**

**Provenance:** Kwagu’ł band artist

**Description:**

Technically, the style and form of Kwakwaka'wakw totem-poles as well as masks was altered 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 tribes through trade and exchange. Metal carving tools were sharper and more efficient than their traditional lithic counterparts, and modern synthetic paints allowed for more dramatic and durable coloration than did the plant and mineral based pigments previously used (Jonaitis 1991: 39, 54).

However, with all this technological change the role of the past is still evident in the conservatism among some sculptors who refer to historic totem poles and masks in their work. In this respect, historic totem poles are highly valued by the Kwakwaka'wakw as manifestations of ancestral spirits and supernatural beings. Unlike masks these supernatural entities are embodied through erection of totem poles for a select viewing audience (Greenville 1998: 14), and, in addition, individual family groups and individual sculptors vary in their visual expression of different myths and characters (Malin 1978: 47). Since each totem pole is “owned” by particular families and passed down by elders and chiefs to their immediate and extended families, they have a familial conservatism in their local presentation (Gosden and Marshall 1999: 172), which is reflected in the way sculptors create new totem poles (Malin 1978:18-19; Ostrowitz and Jonaitis 1991: 251).

The traditional homeland of several bands of Kwak’wala speakers is Fort Rupert on northeastern Vancouver Island. The Kwagu’ł band living at Fort Rupert has been considered one of the highest-ranked bands, with illustrious lineage from mythic time to the historic present. Their home is a site of strong traditional ceremonialism and symbolism. In 1849, the Hudson's Bay Company established a trading post there, thus promoting Fort Rupert as a *rendezvous* or center for trade and exchange as the most prominent village of the last half of the nineteenth century in the Northwest for exchanging iconographies and myths. George Hunt was raised by his Kwakwaka’wakw mother in indigenous ways but energized by his Scottish father to preserve valuable Kwakwaka’wakw information and hundreds of utilitarian and ceremonial artifacts which he deposited in museums beginning in the 1890s (see Boas and Hunt 1902-1905).

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