Case 8-A484- Can-Vancouver Is-Kwakwaka'wakw-Raven-Mask-Wood-1960



Figs. 1-2. Can-Vancouver Is-Kwakwaka'wakw-Raven Mask-Wood-1960

**Case no.: 8**

**Accession Number: A484**

**Formal Label:** Can-Vancouver Is-Kwakwaka'wakw-Raven Mask-Wood-1960**Display Description:**

U'melth is the Raven, who brought the Kwakwaka'wakw people the moon, fire, salmon, the sun and the tides. The Kwakwaka'wakw creation narrative states the world was created by a raven flying over water, who, finding nowhere to land, decided to create islands by dropping small pebbles into the water. He then created trees and grass, and, after several failed attempts, he made the first man and woman out of wood and clay. Like all Indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest Coast, most of the Kwakwaka'wakw tribes have stories about their people surviving the flood. With some of these nations, their history talks of their ancestors transforming into their natural form and disappearing while the waters rose then subsided. For others, they have stories of their people attaching their oceangoing canoes to tall peaking mountains. For the stories about supernatural powers, these figures tend to be the founding clans of some Kwakwaka'wakw nations.

**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 black paint.

**Dimensions:**

**Weight:**

**Condition: original**

**Provenance:** artist

**Description:**

Technically, the style and form of masks and 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 masks (Jonaitis 1991: 39, 54).

However, the rôle of the past is still evident in the conservatism among some sculptors who refer to the masks 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, characters, and masks (Malin 1978: 47). Since each mask 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 masks 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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