Case 8-A495-Can-Vancouver Is-Kwakwaka'wakw-Plaque**-Orca-1960**



Figs. 1-2. Can-Vancouver Is-Kwakwaka'wakw-Plaque**-Orca-1960Case no.: 8**

**Accession Number: A495**

**Formal Label:** Can-Vancouver Is-Kwakwaka'wakw-Plaque**-Orca-1960**

**Display Description:**

The killer whale (also known as Orca or Blackfish) is an important medicine animal to the Native American tribes of the Northwest Coast. Killer whales are considered a particular symbol of power and strength, and catching sight of one is considered a momentous omen. The Kwakwaka'wakw tribes believed that the souls of marine hunters turned into killer whales upon their death, just as the souls of forest hunters turned into wolves. For this reason, there were a number of special rituals regarding the killing of a killer whale, so that its spirit could be reborn as a human once again.

**LC Classification**: E99.K9

**Date or Time Horizon:** 1960

**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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