



Frontlet of a Hawk or Thunderbird

Coast of Tsimshian Frontlet

Unknown Tsimshian artist

Ca. 1840-1870

L: 8 3/4", W: 8", D: 3 1/2"

T0177

<https://collections.fenimoreart.org/objects/1227/frontlet?ctx=ba83acf846b85f4fa8d2fe2b4c5c648d1e6ee121&idx=0>

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When I arrived at the Otsego Institute Workshop in 2002, I was deep into dissertation research. Trained at the University of Washington with Robin Wright and Bill Holm in the realm of formal analysis, I was focused on identifying the stylistic traits of unattributed nineteenth-century artists working in Northwest Coast engraved silver and gold jewelry. Had I examined this frontlet carefully at the time, I would have remarked on certain “classic” Tsimshian stylistic characteristics, such as the carved yet unpainted eyelid line, the narrow eyebrows with rounded ends coming together above open eye socket areas, and the particularly Tsimshian “cheek pyramid.”¹ Otsego faculty likely would have suggested other approaches: Aldona Jonaitis remarking on its narrative “wrappings”—from original context to collection, including commercial and intercultural histories; Jolene Rickard emphasizing the complexities and necessities of community collaboration; Ruth Phillips advising on communicating one’s methodological approach. During the Workshop, all of them modeled various methods I have since integrated into my scholarship, especially in my recent explorations of filmic records of Northwest Coast material culture.

Evidence suggests this frontlet has had the many “social lives” that we as Otsego students explored while studying the Thaw Collection. Recorded in the catalog as “Coast Tsimshian frontlet,” photographs and films illustrate its use and ownership within the Kwakwaka’wakw territories. Originating in the Tsimshian region, the frontlet came eventually to Ba’as, where it was filmed being danced by Joe Seaweed for Robert Gardner’s 1953 *Blunden Harbor* [<http://youtu.be/FYXQG65JvL8>]. By 1964 it was in Alert Bay, photographed at June Sports festivities by Bill Holm. Later it moved from the ownership of Henry George at Port Hardy, through various private hands, and into the Thaw Collection. These overlapping phases of creation, use, and display are not unlike the journey of scholarship that unfolds over various projects and collaborations. While I continue to start my investigations with formal analysis, answering the fundamental questions of where, when, and by whom, I am more interested than ever in identifying the intangible properties—name, song, privileges and territorial claims—that formerly adhered to these objects.

Object-based research when engaged with performative contexts can restore the dynamic nature of artworks. Film, sound, and photographic records document how this Tsimshian frontlet instantiates the ‘Nakwaxda’xw privileges owned by the George family and embodied during its use in *Tlasula* dances. These contexts have been long acknowledged but rarely fully explored as central to art historical inquiry. As museums expand beyond storage shelves into new ways of documenting context that challenge current cataloging and retrieval systems, they must rework the academic categorization of objects and practices in ways that allow for multiple knowledge systems and priorities.² Institutions and academics must partner with communities in “engaging

¹ Holm, Bill. “Form in Northwest Coast Art.” In *Indian Art Traditions of the Northwest Coast*. ed. Roy L. Carlson (Burnaby, B.C.: Simon Fraser University Press, 1983), 42.

² Duffek, Karen. “Value Added: The Northwest Coast Art Market since 1965” in *Native Art of the Northwest Coast : A History of Changing Ideas*. eds. Charlotte Townsend-Gault, Jennifer Kramer and Kike-in, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013), 984.

the intangible”³—reintegrating physical objects with the intangible cultural property of dance, song, names, and genealogies; grappling with issues of access and authority, consent and rights management; and constructing and honoring reciprocal relationships with communities of origin.

Museum display (and text-based art historical inquiries) excise objects from their performative setting, decoupling them from the contexts that activate their cultural meaning, severing instantiations of privilege, and rendering the object a mere artifact of the dynamic moment of meaning. Decades of emphasis on “art” outside of its performative, functional context have compounded the consequences of misrepresentation adrift from community knowledge. The archival history of this Tsimshian/’Nakwaxda'xw frontlet in the Thaw Collection is rich with possibility to re-establish those connections. Motion pictures, sound recordings, and still photographs have captured moments of its use, ownership, and location. Archival sleuthing integrated with community memory and collaboration will enliven its history, reuniting its material aspects with its intangible heritage.

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³ Bunn-Marcuse, Kathryn. Engaging the Intangible—Kwakwaka’wakw Objects, Performance, and Privilege. Conference Paper, Native American Art Studies Association, Denver 2013.