



*Hinkiits'am* (Paired Serpent Headdresses)

Unknown Nuu-chah-nulth artist

ca. 1860-1880

Ht: 8 5/8" (F), 9 1/2" (M); L: 24 1/2" (F), 26" (M); W: 7" (F), 6 1/2" (M)

T0159a-b

<http://collections.fenimoreartmuseum.org/items/show/986>

By Denise Nicole Green (Cornell University)

*Hinkiits'am* (paired serpent headdresses) are an important chiefly treasure belonging to Nuu-chah-nulth families on the west coast of Vancouver Island, British Columbia, and the ones in the Thaw Collection at the Fenimore Art Museum are an exquisite example from the late 19th century. *Hinkiits'am* are *ch'ihaamis*, living spiritual beings, which represent power, prestige, and spiritual strength. Each of the four deities in the Nuu-chah-nulth pantheon have a serpent messenger, the most well known being the *Heya'tliik* (Lightning Serpent), messenger of *Haalthapii Ha'wilth* (Spiritual Deity of the Sky World) and harpoon of *Tiitskin* (Thunderbird). *Hinkiits'am* are typically danced towards the end of a potlatch, after entertainment and feasting, and in support of the host family's "business"--that is, their main purpose for hosting the ceremony. As material evidence of a family's status, such treasures were rarely sold and occasionally burned as *chitmaktlkwii* (possessions of the dead) immediately following the death of a big chief; therefore, very few complete *hinkiits'am* pairs are held by museums.

According to the collection notes, these *hinkiits'am* are likely from the Tla-o-qui-aht, one of the Nuu-chah-nulth Nations. During the late 19th century, the Tla-o-qui-aht had a reputation for being talented carvers, painters, and weavers and sold many fine artworks and curios to serious collectors and tourists alike. However, I would argue that the headdresses in the Thaw collection were not made explicitly for the arts market--firstly, because the headdresses feature a tin can contraption for

dispersing *ts'iilthin* (eagle down), a complex augmentation that suggests a ceremonial function; and secondly, because it would have been inappropriate to make ceremonial pieces for direct sale to the art market. It is very likely that these headdresses were a family's ceremonial treasure, and danced during a potlatch ceremony.

The late 19th century was a period of dramatic cultural and economic change for the Nuu-chah-nulth. According to the 1891 Canadian census, 403 of the 439 men listed as sealers in Canada were Nuu-chah-nulth, accounting for over 40% of Nuu-chah-nulth men between the ages of 15-65. Wages from commercial sealing fueled the prestige economy, which in turn increased production of ceremonial paraphernalia. In this pair of headdresses, traditional approaches to carving and bending cedar have been fused with newly available trade goods. Tin cans with spinning wooden blades, controlled by levers underneath the headdresses, have been mounted at the top of both pieces and cleverly hidden by four small, carved, painted boards (Figure 1). Twisting the lever enables the dancer to fling eagle down from the top of the serpent's head. Eagle down is highly treasured, and only some families on the west coast have the right to spread it on the potlatch floor as a means of "setting the floor" to create sacred space. The headdresses also feature newly available surface design colors: trade vermilion and Reckitt's Crown Blue, a laundry washing blue that was produced in Hull, Quebec and used extensively in Northwest Coast painting in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These *Hinkiits'am* epitomize the creativity, experimentation, and ingenuity characteristic of late 19th century Northwest Coast ceremonial paraphernalia.

Figure 1: Detail of *hinkiits'am* (T0159b) from above. Cedar bark and decorative carving conceal a tin can, inside of which a contraption (seen bottom center) is used to spread eagle down while dancing.