



Mask (Hamsamł) Depicting Raven  
Unknown Kwakwaka'wakw artist  
ca. 1870  
Ht: 9" not including fringe; L: 26 1/4"  
T0523

<http://collections.fenimoreartmuseum.org/items/show/1244>

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When I arrived at the 2002 Otsego Institute Workshop, I had already begun archival research into the Kwakwaka'wakw Hamat'sa or "Cannibal Dance," one of the highest ranked, hereditary prerogatives of the *t'seka* (Red Cedar Bark or Winter Ceremonial). My doctoral work was focused on the long, intercultural history of the dance—the intertwined legacies of ethnographic representation in various media (textual description, photography and film, and museum collection and display) and strategic Kwakwaka'wakw decisions to adapt the dance's regalia and performance to changing colonial circumstances throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Workshop was perfectly timed, just before I set out on eighteen months of museum-based research and fieldwork in British Columbia. Although I did not focus on the Thaw Collection's distinctive Hamat'sa mask that week, I gained particular appreciation for the need to hang larger historical and cultural context on the scaffold of close attention to material detail.

This type of mask, called *hamsamł*, is worn during the *Hamsamala*, which is one dance in a cycle that marks the initiation of a new Hamat'sa (who performs without a mask). *Hamsamł* depict the monstrous avian associates of *Baxwbakwalanuxsiwe'*, the great man-eating spirit that possesses the initiate, and their appearance in unique configurations and combinations signals particular hereditary privileges. This particular mask represents *Gwagwakwalanuxsiwe'*, the man-eating Raven. Carved of red cedar, it is light enough to be worn on the top of the head with its fringe of shredded cedar bark—distinguishing it as a *t'seka* mask—hanging down to conceal the dancer's body. The hinged jaw is articulated

and made to snap repeatedly during a climactic moment in the dance by means of hidden twine.

Despite their canonical status as icons of Northwest Coast art, very few *hamsamł* entered museums prior to the early twentieth century (likely because so few families then claimed rights to the Hamat'sa privilege, and those that did may have been hesitant to sell their regalia due to its status). With its grey (as opposed to white) eye field and absence of ornamentation, this mask—tentatively dated to the 1870s—represents a late nineteenth-century style of Kwakwaka'wakw art (see Fig. 1) prior to its “baroque” elaboration over subsequent decades (Figs. 2 and 3). Although the contour of the beak and nostril forms, the concentrically ringed eyeball, and the outline of the eye field are typical of Raven *hamsamł* masks, it lacks many elements seen in other contemporaneous and later examples, including relief carving around the eyelid and sclera (which is usually painted), perforation of the nostrils, and fine white outlining of dominant features. The bird's forward gaze, while common, is enhanced here by the asymmetry of the eyeballs' placement within their sockets. It is most likely painted with paints and pigments acquired in trade, including the distinctive vermilion common to the era. While impossible to explain definitively, this mask's spare treatment could be due to a rather hasty creation; after the potlatch and Hamat'sa were outlawed by the Canadian government in 1884, some masks may have been prepared quickly for ritual use under the watchful eyes of colonial authorities. Nonetheless, the ritual and its masks survived the prohibition period. By the 1960s and 1970s, many *hamsamł* came to be dominated by the elaborate, often glossy and multichrome styles developed by artists such as Willie Seaweed (Fig. 2) and Mungo Martin, especially after large collections of them were assembled in British Columbia and subsequently exhibited and published.<sup>1</sup>

Although it lacks known Indigenous provenance, this mask was acquired in 1915 by Harry G. Beasley, a Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute and specialist in Pacific cultures. It was featured for years in his private Cranmore Ethnographical Museum in Chiselhurst, England before the collection was disbanded.

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<sup>1</sup> Hawthorn, Audrey (1967) *The Art of the Kwakiutl Indians and Other Northwest Coast Tribes*. Vancouver: UBC Press; Hawthorn, Audrey (1979) *Kwakiutl Art*. Vancouver: UBC Press; Holm, Bill (1983a) *Smoky-Top: The Art and Times of Willie Seaweed*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.



Figure 1: Raven hamsamł, Kwakwaka'wakw, mid-to-late nineteenth century. Brooklyn Museum #15.513a-c.

[http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/154396/Raven\\_Mask](http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/154396/Raven_Mask)



Figure 2: Raven hamsamł carved by Willie Seaweed ('Nak'waxda'xw/Kwakwaka'wakw) in 1899. UBC Museum of Anthropology #A4249.

<http://collection-online.moa.ubc.ca/collection-online/search/item?keywords=A4249&row=0>



Figure 3: Raven hamsamł, Dzawada'enuxw/Kwakwaka'wakw, early twentieth century.  
UBC Museum of Anthropology #A3815.

<http://collection-online.moa.ubc.ca/collection-online/search/item?keywords=A3815&row=0>