



**Moon Mask**

Unknown Heiltsuk artist

ca. 1880-1900

Ht: 13 ¾" ; W: 12 ¼" ; D: 6"

T0164

<https://collections.fenimoreart.org/objects/1213/moon-mask?ctx=a8cab11e4a0099306c133a6ddd68721da63e023b&idx=0>

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As a member of the first cohort of emerging scholars to attend the Otsego Institute Workshop in 2001, I feel privileged to write about an object in the Eugene and Clare Thaw Collection of American Indian Art at the Fenimore Art Museum. Otsego brought together scholars of art history and anthropology, art dealers, and Native artists to interact in meaningful discourse and “deep looking.” The desire was to return attention to the formal qualities of material culture recognized as works of art, but also to assemble cultural, economic, and political perspectives with which to research and value objects. The engagement layered ways of knowing into a sensuous experience. Asked to wrap a feather in yarn and embellish it with beads to turn our intellectual exercise into an embodied experience, we learned to interweave glossy strands of interpretation into strong chains of meaning.

This “Moon Mask” can be read as evidence of the past and continuing presence of Heiltsuk people on the central Northwest Coast of Canada. Because this mask fits within a recognized canon of Heiltsuk tribal art style at the turn of the nineteenth century<sup>1</sup> it has the potential to be used as materialized proof of cohesive, ongoing identity by the Heiltsuk Tribal Council in order to assert title to traditional territory in a Canadian court of law. However, it can also be visually analyzed as a mixture of Heiltsuk and Nuxalk carving and painting styles, harkening to the existence until the 1920s of the village of Kimsquit – a community where Heiltsuk and Nuxalk intermarried and spoke bilingually.<sup>2</sup> While the shape of the face (more oval than round), the narrow bridged, wide nose, and the mustache are diagnostic of Heiltsuk style, the eyelid defined only by the blue painted eye-socket, not carved in relief, and the small crease where the eye-socket meets the temple area point to Nuxalk characteristics. Historically, Kimsquit engendered intermingled genealogies of Heiltsuk/Nuxalk family lines with overlapping origin stories, songs, and dances, and produced a unique regional art style obscured by those who theorize each First Nation with delineated borders of territory and art style<sup>3</sup> (Black 1997 & 1998).

Harry B. Hawthorn (the first Director of the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, who dedicated his academic career to studying and enhancing economic opportunities for modern Native lives) collected this mask sometime between 1947 and 1974. Representing the changing realities for Native people on the Northwest Coast in the mid-twentieth century, this mask’s function altered from celestial supernatural being called down for spiritual, ceremonial purposes to a commodity sold into the art market and museum world for economic gain, ethnographic knowledge, and aesthetic appreciation.

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<sup>1</sup> Brown, Steven C. (1998) *Native Visions: Evolution in Northwest Coast Art from the Eighteenth to the Twentieth Century*. Seattle: Seattle Art Museum, in association with the University of Washington Press; Holm, Bill (1983) “Form in Northwest Coast Art” In *Indian Art Traditions of the Northwest Coast*. Edited by Roy L. Carlson, 33-45. Burnaby, BC: Archaeology Press, Simon Fraser University; Macnair, Peter L., Alan L. Hoover, and Kevin Neary (1984) *The Legacy: Tradition and Innovation in Northwest Coast Indian Art*. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre Press; Seattle: University of Washington Press; McLennan, Bill and Karen Duffek (2000) *The Transforming Image: Painted Arts*

<sup>2</sup> Hilton, Suzanne F. (1990) “Haihais, Bella Bella, and Oowekeeno” In *Handbook of North American Indians*, Volume 7, Northwest Coast, edited by Wayne Suttles, 312-22. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.

<sup>3</sup> Black, Martha (1998) *The Heiltsuk Case: Museums, Collectors, Inventories*. Art History Thesis (Ph.D), University of Victoria; Black, Martha (1997) *Bella Bella: A Season of Heiltsuk Art*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Most interesting to me, this Moon mask could be used in the twenty-first century as a symbol of returning celestial ceremonial dance complexes historically shared between Heiltsuk and Nuxalk communities. When elders, language speakers, cultural teachers, and artists from Bella Bella and Bella Coola travel together to visit cultural belongings held in distant museum collections, they return home with both renewed and new knowledge of their interconnections past, present and future. Masks, such as this one, can stimulate contemporary confidence and control necessary for self-definition and self-determination. While I do not wish to speak for the Heiltsuk or the Nuxalk or displace their authority to value objects, I acknowledge that I am implicated in a common endeavor. This is the work begun at Otsego and ongoing as I head to Bella Coola to meet with Heiltsuk friends to witness the bringing out of celestial masks at a Nuxalk potlatch on October 10-11, 2014.

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