



Blunderbuss

English manufacture with carving by unknown Tlingit or Haida artist

ca. 1803

L:32"; W: 2.75"

T0210

<http://collections.fenimoreartmuseum.org/node/5390>

By Christopher Martin (University of Aberdeen)

The Thaw Collection's blunderbuss can be made to show several hybridities when asked to. It is an amalgamation of materials – walnut wood, iron, and brass – brought together to create a single, usable object. It is the product of two cultures, displaying the maker's mark of English weaponsmith "Blake", and the formline designs of a Haida or Tlingit carver from the northern Northwest Coast of North America. It is a practical weapon and a ceremonial *at'ooow* (treasured possession); functional and beautiful; industrial and personal. But in incorporating all of these categories, it is defined by none of them, an end result not confined to the sum of its parts. So, what is it? And how did it come to be?

The unadorned blunderbuss journeyed to the Northwest Coast as part of the Pacific Fur Trade, a European endeavour which brought ships and men halfway round the world (Figure 1) to procure the pelts of the North American sea otter and its distant relative the beaver (Carlos and Lewis 2010; Fisher 1977; Vaughan 1982). But while part of a grand endeavour, its movement from a European owner to one of Haida or Tlingit heritage would have been personal, likely a ceremonial gift to secure a trade partnership or personal bond (Fisher 1976:7). Its precise journey is unknown, but clearly it was transformed into more than a firearm, the formline creatures intricately entangled with the original form of the stock and grip revealing the spiritual assistance imbued within. As a locus for interaction between beings of European, Native, and non-human heritage, the blunderbuss has become a tangible record of diverse interactions between persons and their worlds.

Physical transformation marked the movement of the blunderbuss into a Tlingit ontology, indigenizing it like so many other trade goods across the Northwest Coast such as powder horns (Figure 2) and silver dollars (Figure 3). Much as coins were reformed into bracelets, giving them meaning within kinship and potlatch systems (Bunn-Marcuse 2000), the blunderbuss was recreated as an *at'ooow* (Grinev, 2005: 70-89) and entrusted to a Raven moiety, thereby entangling it within Tlingit systems of value. While still of British origin, it

was adopted into a new position that caused it to exist in two forms simultaneously: as a firearm, and a spiritually potent *at'oow*.

How did its nineteenth-century Tlingit owners conceive of it? Did it cease to be a weapon? Or did it serve multiple purposes on its journey to becoming *at'oow*? As a weapon it is now moribund, a relic of a past age, but as *at'oow* its significance continues to this day, as demonstrated by its recent return to the Yanyeidí of the Taku River region where it participated in a *ku'eex* (potlatch) ceremony (Eva Fognell, pers. comm. May 2017). Its familiarity of form belies its complexity.

Previously I would have approached this object biographically, detailing its various iterations through time, but conversations with fellow Otsego participants presented me with a different possibility, that of transformation. Rather than hybridising the blunderbuss, the changes it has undergone have fundamentally transformed it, taking it from its original conception and reconfiguring it as something unique. It defies categorization, unable to be discussed solely in the manner of Tlingit-made objects, or as a product of Euro-Indigenous interaction. It is both things and many more besides; it is the representation of complex histories played out on an intimate and a grand scale, sliding between categories and challenging us to rethink the categorization of seemingly discrete entities while remaining elusive through its constant transformation.

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Figure 1 - Gajaa Héen (Old Sitka), circa 1827



Figure 2 - Powder Horn, Thaw Collection T0774



Figure 3 - Silver Bracelets featuring European designs. Holm, 1983