



Dagger with Dogfish Image

Unknown Tlingit artist

ca. 1890

Ht: 23"; W: 3 1/2"; D: 1/2" T0553

<https://collections.fenimoreart.org/objects/1250/dagger?ctx=a01e400c894b6c957e2f6bfff6d6effb8d1fd8&idx=0>

By Ashley Verplank McClelland
Burke Museum



Each object in the Thaw Collection at the Fenimore Art Museum has a story to tell. Thanks to the support of the Otsego Institute, some of us are able to explore these stories in person. My experience in Cooperstown, NY was not only enlightening and educational, it provided me with new ways to approach my research, and I profited from the knowledge and experience of the Otsego mentors and attendees.

One object of special interest was this made-for-sale Tlingit dagger. The Tlingit metalsmiths who created these daggers, which appeared in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, did not have the same level of training or expertise as eighteenth century smiths and their work is not fully appreciated by Northwest Coast Native art enthusiasts. For many years, collectors, dealers, and some scholars have deemed tourist art as degenerate versions of traditional art forms. For example, the dagger had previously belonged to Adelaide de Menil and Edmund Carpenter. A letter from Carpenter sent to the institution in February of 2002 states: “My interest in tribal art doesn’t extend to souvenirs made for tourists. So we sold all of the daggers we had.”

However, after seeing this dagger in person and reading its catalog record, it was clear to me that these made-for-sale daggers are grossly underappreciated. They are true works of art that can be linked to the power and continuity of Tlingit culture.

This dagger features a sheep horn pommel carved to represent a dogfish and is generously inlaid with abalone. The copper blade has a single-raised median, which was created separately and has been riveted onto the piece, mimicking the distinct Tlingit style. The date listed in the Fenimore’s catalog record is ca. 1890 with the place of origin given as Skagway-Yakutat-Angoon Division, AK. Although these daggers were created using different techniques than eighteenth-century Tlingit daggers, the complexity of their fabrication still required metalsmithing talent, knowledge of the traditional single-raised median blade form, and respect for the dagger’s importance within Tlingit society.

In 1905, George Byron Gordon from the University of Pennsylvania Museum bought three of these copper daggers from a young Tlingit man by the name of Louis Shotridge. Shotridge’s father was the housemaster of the famous Whale House of Klukwan, Alaska. A well-known Tlingit oral legend states that the first metalsmith, a woman known as *Shukasaka*, was from the village of Klukwan, forever linking the fabrication of Tlingit daggers with this region. Gordon later chastised Shotridge for selling him objects that were too new. In 1907 Shotridge replied: “...those that I sold to you in Portland my father thought they were good, and everybody said so because they were the kind of knives and things [that] was used [in the] olden days.”

It is obvious that these newly fashioned daggers were still respected within the Tlingit community and a 1912 photograph of Shotridge in full Tlingit regalia depicts a noble and proud man grasping a made-for-sale eagle pommel dagger (Figure One). The intricately carved eagle head visually conveys his Eagle moiety membership, as well as his high status. It is my hope that scholars and collectors will acknowledge that these made-for-sale daggers are something more than inferior souvenirs and appreciate them as works of art in their own right.

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[<https://www.theotsegoinstitute.org/uploads/1/3/9/6/139631595/mcclelland.pdf>].



Figure 1: Louis Shotrige or Stuwukáa (1882–1937) dressed in clan regalia for a portrait taken at the Penn Museum, ca. 1919 (UPM Image #140236). <http://www.penn.museum/sites/expedition/louis-shotrige-and-the-penn-museum/>