



Female figure

Unknown Haida artist

ca. 1830

H: 11”

T0186

[URL coming soon]

By Kaitlin McCormick (University of Edinburgh)

This small but robust Haida female figure poses openly and assertively, her face projecting coolness and confidence. Wearing European clothing, the artist has also communicated her high status in Haida society through adornment including elaborate yarn earrings and a (missing) labret. Clutching the handle of a purse in her right hand, she bunches the fabric of her red shawl in her left. The supple appearance of her clothing, as well as the details of her collar, cuffs and belt, testifies to the talent and observational skill of the carver. Her hair, parted at the middle, is braided and wrapped in a style popular among historical Aboriginal women and seen on a number of female figures populating mid-nineteenth century Haida argillite ship pipes.¹ Who is she?

Art historian Megan Smetzer describes this figure as representing a cosmopolitan Haida woman, illustrative of the “complex cultural exchanges that defined the middle

decades of the nineteenth century” on North America’s Northwest Coast.² Modelling high-status adornment and the purse to signify her control of wealth, Smetzer links this figure to Haida oral histories in which female ancestors play powerful and procreative roles in the foundation of Haida lineages, such as Djilakons the ancestress of the Eagle moiety. As Smetzer argues, the piece also sheds light on the trade acumen and mobility of historical Haida women, while tacitly speaking to the artist’s own engagement in new market contexts, as this figure was likely intended for trade to a non-Haida souvenir-seeker.

Still, this finely featured figure warrants further research. Comparing and contrasting this piece with similar works in other collections prompts new questions that could complicate our understanding of the social experiences of young Haida women – while responding to Smetzer’s call to address gender issues, which, problematically, are underrepresented in Northwest Coast art histories.³

This piece resembles another single, youthful, but possibly lower-status, Haida female figure auctioned in 2014.⁴ Other public collections contain similar female figures that appear in male-female pairs, though their faces are painted with crests and they are ensconced in blankets (Fig. 1). Their closed countenances contrast with the relative openness of the younger, single women.⁵ Still other such female figures wear large labrets, indicating their advanced age and high rank.⁶

Why is this young woman missing her labret? Does its absence testify to the piece’s material impermanence over nearly two centuries of travel and transfer of ownership? Or, did the artist intend for its omission to serve as a comment on shifting social circumstances and fashions for young Haida women? As Wright has pointed out regarding Haidas’ ready adoption of European material culture, “to be dressed in the European fashion was considered highly desirable.”⁷ Is this a portrait of a specific young, elite Haida woman engaged in negotiating the complex social and cultural transformations of the modernising Northwest Coast? If so, how would she have negotiated the performance of European sensibilities in the context of her home village? The beauty of this figure is counterbalanced with an ambivalence that demands further inquiry into the identity of the subject.

My participation in the 2015 Otsego workshop challenged me to think more critically about the relationship between materials and meaning in historical Indigenous art objects. I would like to thank organisers and faculty members for the opportunity to participate in these intellectually challenging conversations.

¹ Robin K. Wright, “The Depiction of Women in Nineteenth Century Haida Argillite Carving,” *American Indian Art Magazine* 11 (4) (Autumn 1986), 40.

² Megan Smetzer, Otsego Institute Alumni Review, 2005
[<http://www.otsegoinstitute.org/megan-smetzer.html>].

³ Smetzer, Otsego Institute Alumni Review, 2005
[<http://www.otsegoinstitute.org/megan-smetzer.html>].

⁴ Sotheby’s, “Haida portrait figure, Northwest Coast,”
<http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2014/myron-kunin-collection-african-art-n09225/lot.164.html> (accessed 30 November 2015).

⁵ See figure 9504 in the collections of the University of Aberdeen Museums. See also figure 304 pictured in Ralph T. Coe, *Sacred Circles: Two Thousand Years of North American Indian Art* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1976), 143.

⁶ See figures pictured in Coe, *Sacred Circles*, 143 (figure 305), and Steven Phelps, *Art and Artefacts of the Pacific, Africa and the Americas: The James Hooper Collection* (London: Hutchison/Christie’s, 1975), 314 (plate 182). See also Sotheby’s, “Pair of Haida Wood Figures,”
<http://www.sothebys.com/it/auctions/ecatalogue/2009/american-indian-art-including-property-from-the-collection-of-frieda-and-milton-roenthal-n08554/lot.201.html> (accessed 10 December 2015).

⁷ Wright, “The Depiction of Women,” 43.

Figure 1. Haida figure made by an unknown Haida artist. Wood, pigment, H: 11 inches. University of Aberdeen Museums, 9504. Collection of Captain William Mitchell. Photograph by Kaitlin McCormick, courtesy of University of Aberdeen Museums