



House posts from Taquan Village

Unknown Tlingit artist

ca. 1820-1840

Ht: (a) 105" (b) 104" W: a) 38", b) 38" D: a) 12 ¾", b) 11"

T0307a-b

<http://collections.fenimoreartmuseum.org/items/show/1185>

By Emily Moore (Colorado State University)

This exquisite pair of Tlingit house posts from the village of Taquan in southern Southeast Alaska feature Raven, a powerful creator and trickster figure in Northwest Coast tradition. He appears to be flying—or possibly diving—with a round object in his beak, perhaps in reference to the story of Raven stealing the sun. The artist chose to depict Raven from a “bird’s eye view,” availing himself of the span of wings and tail to showcase the ovoids, U-forms and other two-dimensional elements of Northwest Coast formline design. But the posts are also a study in relief carving, as Raven emerges out of the flat base of the board in increasingly volumetric form, culminating in his fully rounded head near the base of the post.

House posts are less famous than their taller counterpart, the totem pole, but they are actually more typical of nineteenth-century Tlingit carving. Some northern Tlingit villages did not carve totem poles at all, preferring the traditional form of the interior house post to the exterior totem pole invented by the Tsimshian and Haida.¹ The importance of the house post lay in its dual role as physical and symbolic support for the Tlingit clan house. Structurally, house posts stood at the four inner corners of a clan house to support the great beams that spanned length of the roof; they were considered the “bones” of the house and were often compared to the bones of the human body.² Symbolically, house posts identified the crests of the clan that lived in the house, depicting the animals or supernatural entities that a clan ancestor had encountered and earned the right, often through death, to claim for his or her descendants. House posts are considered clan *at.óow*, a Tlingit word that roughly translates as “owned or purchased thing,” but that also invokes an animate aspect of the object as heavy with the ancestors involved in obtaining it.³

Because they are not carved in the round, the Taquan house posts in the Thaw Collection are more accurately described as “house post boards.” These carved panels could be tied to the real weight-bearing posts that supported the roof, and easily moved if the supporting posts were replaced or if the clan built a new house elsewhere. I am particularly interested in house post boards because they may be related to a form of woven Tlingit regalia known as a Chilkat tunic or shirt (*kudás* in Tlingit).⁴ The shape of a Chilkat tunic almost exactly mirrors that of the house post board, with a long, vertical front for depicting the crest; sloped shoulders; and even a scooping neckline that recalls the indentation at the top of the house post board where the great beam of the ceiling would rest (Fig. 1). Women weavers of Chilkat blankets relied on pattern boards painted by men to chart their designs, so it seems possible that the carved panels of house post boards provided similar guidelines for the tunic, and in my research I have found more and more designs that relate the two Tlingit art forms to each other.



Fig. 1: Jennie Thlunaut (Tlingit), “Two Door House Tunic,” Portland Art Museum, 88.43.21.

[<https://www.flickr.com/photos/microwavedboy/7631834384/>]

¹ Aldona Jonaitis, *Art of the Northern Tlingit* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1986), 17.

² Sergei Kan, *Symbolic Immortality: The Tlingit Potlatch of the Nineteenth Century* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989, 51; also Thomas F. Thornton, *Being and Place Among the Tlingit*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), 177.

³ See Richard Dauenhauer and Nora Marks Dauenhauer, *Haa Shuká, Our Ancestors: Tlingit Oral Narratives*, Classics of Tlingit Oral Literature, Vol. 1 (Seattle: University of Washington Press, with Sealaska Heritage Institute, 1987), 24-27.

⁴ Cheryl Samuel was the first to suggest the similarity between house post boards and Chilkat tunics, although her research focused on Chilkat dancing blankets and she did not pursue the comparison further. See Samuel, *The Chilkat Dancing Blanket* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982), 38.