



### Female Figure

Unknown Haida artist

ca. 1830

Ht: 11"; W: 5"; D: 2 7/8"

T0186

<http://collections.fenimoreartmuseum.org/items/show/1336>

By Megan Smetzer (Capilano University)

Wearing a European style dress and shawl, yet displaying the yarn ear ornaments and lip-piercing labret (now missing) of a high-ranked Haida woman, this delicately carved figurine perfectly illustrates the complex cultural exchanges that defined the middle of the nineteenth century on the Northwest Coast of North America. I first encountered this fascinating carving during the 2002 Otsego Institute Workshop, and her features have stayed with me throughout my subsequent studies and research. She reminds me of the intense discussions with my Otsego peers around objects, their makers, and their interpretation in museums and through scholarship. Moreover, she evokes the necessity of foregrounding gender issues on the Northwest Coast, as this continues to be a consistently underrepresented area of study.

The authority wielded by indigenous women within trading relationships often surprised the fur traders who came from patriarchal societies. Among many Northwest Coast communities, high-ranked women were considered better traders than men as they expertly negotiated high demands and stiff parameters around trade. Women also produced food for trade, created items for sale, and sometimes mediated tense situations

that arose during these cross-cultural interactions.<sup>1</sup> The purse clasped in the figurine's right hand subtly reinforces this point of view by implying her control of wealth.

As detailed in travel journals and ship logs, the wood, stone, and shell labrets worn by women to designate rank and status within Haida society fascinated traders. Haida artists quickly recognized this new economic opportunity and began to create portrait masks and figurines depicting these distinctive body adornments. Some of these female figures may have been carved as gifts for specific traders, demonstrating that their value was not purely economic, rather indicative of special trade relationships between individuals.<sup>2</sup> Other layers of meaning are suggested by the fact that depictions of high-ranked women far outnumbered those of men in this era.

The clothing worn by the figure indicates that this is a portrayal of an *au courant* and successful Haida woman. The labret and ear ornaments indicate her strong connections to Haida cultural practices and link her to oral histories that demonstrate the significance of women in terms of cultural origins and social structures. One such woman was the Eagle side ancestress, Djilakons, who travelled to Haida Gwaii, possibly from the Nass River, married a Haida man, and had many children. Among them were her daughters Property-Making-a-Noise and Labret Woman who, along with their siblings, established important Eagle clan families that settled Haida Gwaii and parts of Southeast Alaska.

Oral histories regarding Djilakons and her children embody the types of travel, trade, and wealth associated with women's positions in Haida society. By creating masks and figurines of females adorned with labrets, Haida artists were strategically engaging with new markets that at the very least fulfilled the desires of short-term visitors for unique souvenirs. On a deeper level these artists were making tangible, for a wider world, Haida perspectives that women were powerful, particularly in terms of their ability to acquire wealth and thereby gain prestige for themselves and their clan. This figurine's strong hands-on-hips stance, calm demeanor, and direct gaze convey this concept in a manner that needs no translation.

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<sup>1</sup> Littlefield, Loraine. *The Role of Women in the Northwest Coast Fur Trade*. Unpublished MA Thesis. Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Carleton University, 1987: 106.

<sup>2</sup> Malloy, Mary. *Souvenirs of the Fur Trade: Northwest Coast Indian Art and Artifacts*. Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology: Harvard University, 2000: 14-15.