

## Tlingit House Screen (*pron: TLING -get*)

by Lelooska c.1960 under commission from Donald Judd

(NW Coast) L2010.94a-k

G259

*Object is on loan, so no photographs (see whale house interior image of similar at end of this research document)*

### Key points:

- Joe Horsecapture considers the art of the NW Coast Region the most visually compelling and the most complicated. It is steeped in traditional stories and recognition of status. While basketry, pottery, beadwork, etc were art forms practiced by most peoples of the Americas, this flat painting is unique to NW coast region.
- **Abstraction of form is key element** to painting of NW coast. In modern art, we consider distortion of form and abstraction to begin around 1900 and yet here we have very elaborate abstraction / simplification of shape and line beginning in NW Coast traditions much earlier. We know people have occupied this region for thousands of years, the Tlingit for about 800 years.
- **Key form elements:** line (thick and thin), ovoids, and “U”s – then adding pigment with primarily black, red and blue.
- **House Screens** - usually within a large whale house, as a room divider to separate sacred people and objects. Also used as a backdrop for ceremonial celebrations (marriages, funerals, etc ) See image below of c.1895 whale house screen. Note in image that clothing also includes NW coast aesthetic (abstraction). House screens/wall paintings are sacred to the Tlingit people as they tell history of the clan and demonstrate the status of the family/clan.
- **Entry holes** are low and oval or round. Hole is placed at an awkward level and makes adult passage difficult. Actually meaning for these holes has puzzled anthropologists. Some theorize they require the entrant to stoop, showing respectful humility. Some theories state that the entry is a portal between the sacred and profane worlds. It is perhaps simply to help in the safeguarding of the clan treasure -- difficult for a raider to rush into the space.
- **Screen is allegorical.** House screens of each clan included an animal of particular significance/association to that clan. Animals were not worshipped as deities, but rather viewed as spiritual manifestations of nature whose protection could be sought. This screen represents Raven who is deep in traditional NW coast creation stories. This screen shows an anthropomorphized (humanized) raven and depicts the story of Raven creating lakes and streams by stealing water from Ganook (sole keeper of water). The 13 drops of water are also represented anthropomorphically around the outside border. Soot from Ganook’s fire makes Raven black. (link to complete story below)
- **Donald Judd** (1928-94, minimal artist) sees house screen while touring northwest in late 1950s and wants one, but cannot have because of its sacred nature to the people. He has one commissioned and carved by revered Cherokee carver Lelooska (next point). WAC has many Judd objects. MIA has a few; one is currently on view in G361. Shortly after this piece is commissioned, Judd abandons painting to become a sculptor. He begins his interest in large scale installations and how viewers interact

with art in its space. Perhaps the House Screen influenced his direction as an artist....

- **Lelooska** (literally: To Cut Against Wood with a Knife) is the carver of this House Screen. He learned to carve from his grandfather He-Kill, a Cherokee. Lelooska was adopted by the Nimiipu (Nez Perce) people at the age of 12. He is most known for his mask and totem pole carvings. He prided himself on using only the elbow adze and hooked knives used by his ancestors.
- **Gordon Locksley & George Shea** have amassed an immense collection of art from 1960 forward. They are originally Minneapolis residents and have been longtime supporters of the MIA. The original Locksley Shea Gallery was in Minneapolis. We have many pieces on loan here from their collection. This screen comes into the hands of Locksley, who acquired it sometime after Judd dies in 1994. It is now on long-term loan to the MIA. (Locksley/Shea images represented in Warhol painting in G361 upstairs)

Possible Questions:

- What images can you identify in this carving/painting? (eye, leg, foot, feather....)
- If you were to choose an animal to represent your family/clan, which would you choose and why?
- How do people you know choose to safeguard their most precious belongings?

Gallery connections:

Transformation Mask / video & Rattle. Art Cart has a rattle to actually hold.

Japanese house screens – similarities and differences

Japanese tea house (entrance)

Warhol 'Locksley & Shea' shows images of the collector who has loaned the MIA this House Screen.

Possible Tours:

Art in the Spiritual

Made in America

Safari

Architecture Tour

Art at Home (rooms, doors, hallways, furniture)

**EXPANDED RESEARCH:**

Story of Raven & Ganook:

Creation Story with Raven - He stole water from Ganook (keeper of all water), dropping 13 droplets in the process to create lakes and streams. He bears the mark of the action, as the snowy white bird was forever black as night from the soot of Ganook's fire. Read more at:

<http://www.indians.org/welker/beginnin.htm>

History of MIA's long-term relationship with collectors/gallery owners Locksley & Shea:

[http://www.artsmia.org/press/view.cfm?PR\\_ID=136](http://www.artsmia.org/press/view.cfm?PR_ID=136)

Lelooska ( 1933 - 1996):

<http://www.lelooska.org/>

Wall Screens:

The most northern of the Tlingit people did not produce house front paintings, only interior screens (as our object). Among these people, the screens provide a social status comparable to the totem pole of other NW Coast peoples. The Rain Wall Screen of the Whale House is the most splendid example of interior screens (see photograph of whale house / chief house interior). This particular screen (in photo) still remains in its original location and may be the very screen seen by Judd in the 1950s.

The house screen was often considered a revered part of a lineage or clan's holdings. As a result, clans are reluctant to part with their house screens. Screens were an integral part of a house interior and were daily reminders of family history and status. Even families of lesser status had some type of screen in their homes. It often separated important individuals and/or possessions and sacred objects. For the Tlingit, the *yitsati*, keeper of the house, slept behind the screen. The space was also used as a sacred repository for clan treasures, stored in cedar boxes, carefully guarded behind the screen. Objects were removed and displayed only for very important occasions. Important ceremonies/events were conducted in front of the screen.

*"This type of painting is absolute perfection of line and form on a rough wood surface."*

Source: Northwest Coast Indian Painting: House Fronts and Interior Screens by Edward Malin

NW Coast:

<http://www.artsmia.org/surrounded-by-beauty/northwest/index.html>

The Northwest Coast region is a strip of land, less than 150 miles wide, that extends from the Alaskan Panhandle to present-day northern California. Six different linguistic groups existed within the Northwest Coast region. Fishing, whaling and salmon (picked from the water during spawning) were the basis of their early economy.

The wealthy Native people of the Northwest Coast developed complex social and religious systems and acquired remarkable artistic skills. Men were particularly noted for their carving skills and women for weaving. Although many ceremonial and religious objects were created, most objects were made for the express purpose of proclaiming the wealth and status of important families.

Images of animals on works of art represented social groups known as clans. A clan was composed of two or more family groups. Each clan had its own special animal and traced its right to represent the animal to an ancestor who had once made a covenant with it. An animal image not only identified the clan's heritage but also evoked spiritual protection in return for respect and proper ceremony. The most important animals were ravens, bears, beavers, wolves, whales, and eagles, but nearly every animal known to the Northwest Coast people appeared in their art.

NW Coast style is highly sophisticated, using bold line and outlines. The complex designs often appear tightly contained within the shape. Animal forms are displayed on two-dimensional surfaces as if they have been split down the back and flattened to show all sides. This produces an image that is symmetrical. The beautifully executed images of Northwest Coast art are abstract and sophisticated, resulting in objects of great elegance.

"Interior of Chief Klart-Reech's House, Chilkat, Alaska."

Whale House at Klukwan, c. 1895.  
Photo: Alaska's State Library (Winter & Pond)

