

### **Potlatch, Feasting, and Crests**

Many Northwest Coast societies devote their art and ceremonies to maintaining the social hierarchies of their foremost families, and potlatches are key to this effort. Families organize them to claim the right to inherit power and wealth, proving their worthiness to do so by hosting extravagant events, giving gifts to guests, and exhibiting objects emblazoned with crests.

Crests are human and animal images that explain how families received many kinds of privileges from other-than-human beings. Explorations of the meanings of these images are enacted in performances and told as stories at the potlatch. Prominent families own crests, acquire them through conquest or marriage, and pass them on to descendants.

Masks and other regalia dramatize the origin stories of the great families through dance and song. In addition, the feast bowls and ladles used in serving the food display the crest emblems of the clan and families involved.

Dish, ca. 1750 – 1800

Tlingit or possible Tsimshian

Northwest Coast region

Yew and red cedar, fiber cordage

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0199

An example of Northwest Coast carvers' extraordinary mastery of material and technique is the swell-sided, bent-corner dish. To create one, a thick splint plank or half log thicker than the widest swelled side and in this case 44" long was needed. The four sides of the container are created from this single plank, carved to their convex forms. Then three grooves, called kerfs, are cut vertically inside the plank at the points where the corners will be. After the carefully worked, thinned-out plank has been soaked in water to saturate the wood cells, steam heat is applied to soften the lignin that binds wood cells together. The plank can then be bent on the three kerfs to create the four sides of the container. The fourth corner is usually stitched tightly together with a cord.

Bowl, ca. 1840 – 60

Haida

Haida Gwaii

Northwest Coast region

Dall mountain-sheep horn

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0181

This bowl artfully evokes the posture of an alert, seated seabird whose wings, feet, and tail feathers appear in shallow relief on the outer surface. Sheep-horn bowls often held the seal, whale, or oolachon (candlefish) oil into which feast guests dipped dried salmon, potatoes, and other delicacies.

War Club ca. 1800 – 30

Coast Tsimshian

Northwest Coast region

Caribou or elk antler; blade restored

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0171

Ladle, ca. 1840

Coastal Tsimshian

Northwest Coast region

Alder, paint

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0167

This ladle was used to serve food to guests during a potlatch. Its large size and complex carving signified the wealth and resources of the host's family. The carved figure oversees the distribution of the food in approval and has the features of several beings: the ears of a bear, a wolf-shaped head, and human hands; the handle resembles the dorsal fin of a whale. Among many Northwest Coast groups, sea monsters are often portrayed as a combination of disparate creatures.

The smooth, modeled face, and the round nose blending into the eye sockets are distinctive elements of the Coastal Tsimshian carving style.

Frontlet, ca. 1840 – 70

(Coast?) Tsimshian

Northwest Coast region

Maple, paint, abalone shell, native copper repair on back, twine, string

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0177

This finely carved frontlet, which would have been mounted on a headdress and worn on the forehead, is one of the finest produced by the Tsimshian. The central figure may symbolize Naas Shaki Yei, Raven-at-the-Headwaters-of-the-Nass-River, who is the embodiment of the Creator and the owner of daylight. The bright abalone shells radiating around the central carved form mimic light shining from the sun.

Chilkat Robe, ca. 1850

Tlingit

Northwest Coast region

Mountain-goat wool, yellow cedar bark, linen thread, native dye

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0172

Tlingit men and women collaborated to make Chilkat robes for ceremonies and special occasions, such as potlatches. Men painted approximately  $\frac{2}{3}$ , (one side and center) of the robe's symmetrical design on a pattern board to which women then referred when weaving the garments. They finger-wove the robes using complex braiding and twining techniques to execute curvilinear designs. The central panel on this example depicts a diving whale, a reference to the owner's family history; the face at the panel's center is the blow hole, the tail is above, and the head, with two large, widely spaced eyes, is below. The side panels may depict the whale's back and sides or perhaps a seated raven.

*Woven into the blanket that I wear is an important legend. . . . To those who come asking, "Where is your history?" I answer, "We wear our history." . . . On our clothing is the ownership and history of our land.*

—Austin Hammond, Tlingit elder (1910 – 93)

Bowl ca. 1800 – 40

Coast Tsimshian or Nishga

Northwest Coast region

Alder, red turban snail opercula

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0170

This bowl takes the form of Naas Shaki Yei (Raven-at-the-Headwaters-of-the-Nass-River), who owned daylight until his grandson, Raven-in-Human-Form, coerced it from him and released it to humankind. The rim is inlaid with rare and valuable snail opercula, traded among all coastal Northwest Coast cultures.



Potlatch Figure, ca. 1880 – 95

Kwakwaka'wakw (Kwakiutl)

Northwest Coast region

Red cedar, paint, nails

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0162

This rare sculpture may depict a wealthy Northwest Coast chief. These important men would welcome honored guests to potlatches, events during which beautiful objects and the spoken word related families' histories, their proud accomplishments, their rights and beliefs, and their power. The object he holds close to his chest is a *tl•kwa* (Copper), symbolic of the accumulated wealth of extended families. Each figure has its own individual name and history; the ovoid-shaped face on this example may allude to such a history, but its interpretation has been lost.

Copper, ca. 1840 – 60

Haida or Tsimshian

Northwest Coast region

Copper sheet, paint

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0715

At potlatches, influential chiefs displayed so-called Coppers, symbols of wealth. This one is rare because of the engraved design. The figure portrayed is probably a bird, shown with two eyes, an abstracted beak, and talons in the two corners of the decorated area. The artist uses the formline style—a curving line that tends to get wider and then thinner throughout the composition—to emphasize the mouth and eye sockets.

Rattle, ca. 1860 – 80

Nuu-chah-nulth (Nootka) or Makah

Northwest Coast region

Wood (possibly yew), twine, sinew, brass tack, pebbles

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0769

The Nuu-chah-nulth and the Makah have multiday ceremonies during which they initiate young people into their Wolf societies. Initiates are removed from the village and taught important cultural traditions. In dances performed during the ceremony, rattles such as this one depicting a grouse accompany song and dance performances. The smooth, round body of the rattle provides a large resonating cavity, which may once have contained small stones from a grouse's gizzard to make a rattling sound.

Hat, ca. 1890

Charles (1839-1920) and Isabella (1858-1926) Edenshaw

Haida

Northwest Coast region

Spruce root, paint

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0818

The Edenshaws, a married couple, are among the most renowned Haida artists of their time. After she wove this hat, he painted it with raven imagery. Hats were the single most important item of Northwest Coast dress, and also were very popular among collectors.

Dzunukwa Mask (Dzoónokwa), ca. 1850 – 70

Kwakwaka'wakw (Kwakiutl)

Northwest Coast region

Red cedar, black-bear skin, human hair, paint, forged iron nails, sinew, bite loop

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0160

In dramatic dance performances, Dzunukwa is a powerful ancient woman who can bring wealth, and is known to carry away errant children in a basket on her back. A huge, howling, hairy woman of the forest, Dzoónokwa scares children into behaving well by threatening to eat them. Primarily, however, she's a giver of wealth: she owns the forest's riches, including precious copper, and releases them to humans who outwit her. Often, as here, she is represented with a heavy brow, arched nose, sunken eyes, and pursed lips.

Mask, ca. 1870

Kwakwaka'wakw (Kwakiutl)

Northwest Coast region

Red-cedar wood and bark, pigment, leather straps, iron nails

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0523

The Raven mask appears in the Hamatsa dance, a complex series of movements associated with an initiation ceremony. Its beak is rigged to snap at flesh, as he is one of the man-eating birds of the Hamatsa Society. During initiations, masked dancers transform into wild Hamatsa spirits, capture young men of high status, and whisk them into the forest to learn the society's mysteries. When the initiates emerge, possessed and maddened by the spirits, women help to tame and return them to the social order. Ritual's healing power tames the wild, dangerous, and uncivilized into the socially acceptable.

*All the world is somewhere else. . . . I am the mask. I am the bird. I am the animal. I am the spirit. . . . I transcend into the being of the mask.*

—Chief Robert Joseph, Kwakwaka'wakw (Kwakiutl), 1998, recalling his youthful experience as a ceremonial dancer

Mask, ca. 1820 – 70

Nuu-chah-nulth (Nootka)

Northwest Coast region

Alder, paint, human hair

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0158

Bowl, ca. 1800-1850

Wasco-Wishram

Northwest Coast region

Bighorn-sheep horn

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0148

In the Wishram and Wasco tradition, the overall shape of the horn bowl reflects the ancient geometric-design style of the region. The bowl appears round or widely oval from above, the sides of the vessel are nearly level, and the ends rise up in rectilinear finials that usually are pierced with rectangular vertical slots and capped with pierced triangular waves along the tops. The chip-carved zigzag lines on this sheep-horn bowl recall the design style of southern Northwest Coast cultures near the Lower Columbia River. The chip carving also frames several stylized humanlike faces that may represent guardian spirits related to annual root-gathering ceremonies. The faces are geometric, with straight lines defining the brow and nose, a pointed oval representing the mouth, and half-circles for the eyes.



Bowl, ca. 1780 – 1820

Nuu-chah-nulth (Nootka)

Northwest Coast region

Spruce, pigments

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0807

This rare and venerable bowl held the red pigment that members of the Wolf Society painted on their faces before performing ritual duties, such as inviting villagers to the great feast that launched the society's annual ceremony. One face on the chamber extends its tongue, a symbol of the transfer of knowledge and power.

This object shares aesthetic characteristics with ancient stone bowls from neighboring Coast and Inland Salish territories, which also depict a human holding a bowl between its arms and legs.

Bowl, ca. A.D. 100 – 1000

Central Coast Salish

Northwest Coast region

Soapstone

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0766

This ancient bowl, one of the finest of its kind, is dense with sacred symbols: the rattlesnake trailing down the spine, the skeletal emaciation, the large eyes, and the mouth that sings or calls the spirits.

Mask, ca. 1800 – 40

Tlingit

Northwest Coast region

Alder, copper, bear skin, red turban snail opercula, leather, paint

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0214

This magnificently malevolent mask directly manifests a powerful spirit being that helped a shaman mediate between the worlds of matter and spirit. The round circles radiating from the mouth that represent sucker disks identify it as an octopus, as does its peaked, beaklike mouth lined with copper. Like shamans, the octopus can transform itself: It squeezes its often enormous body into extremely narrow crevices, and eludes danger by releasing ink and changing the color and texture of its skin.

Amulet, ca. 1730 – 1830

Tlingit

Northwest Coast region

Sperm-whale tooth

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0790

Rattle, ca. 1830 – 60

Tlingit

Northwest Coast region

Hardwood, ermine skins, fiber cordage, paint

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0768

A shaman on the Northwest Coast may have used this rattle; its carving suggests it is imbued with the combination of sound and spiritual power. The artist re-created the shape of an oystercatcher, a bird that inhabits the area, and captured the graceful flow of its neck and beak. The images on the back are a testament to the rattle's use. A bird, probably a raven, holds the twisted hair of a witch, who is lying on a frog.

Dagger Hilt, ca. 1800 – 40

Haida

Northwest Coast region

Walrus tusk, iron band and screw

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0190

Northwest Coast artists have long favored the medium of walrus ivory. This exquisitely modeled dagger hilt with its tiny, delicate figures has the same visual impact as monumental totem poles. It depicts a bear surmounted by a human whose head rests atop the bear's and whose arms extend through his ears. The bear holds a frog in its mouth and forefeet. The blending of two figures in the same artistic space, a hallmark of Northwest Coast art, can be interpreted to symbolize their spiritual connection.

Dagger, ca. 1880

Tlingit

Northwest Coast region

Horn, copper, abalone shell, leather strips

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0555

Northwest Coast artists steamed, boiled, and bent sheep horn to create graceful objects. The sheep-horn hilt on this dagger is a three-dimensional representation of a wolf's head. Because the blade is made of flexible copper, the object probably was not intended for combat. Thin pieces of copper, a metal associated with wealth, subtly emphasize the mouth, nostrils, eyebrows, and back of the head. The iridescent abalone-shell inlay, a highly valued material traded from California, has a reflective quality ideal for highlighting the creature's eyes.

War Helmet, ca. 1780 – 1840

Tlingit

Northwest Coast region

Wood, human hair, pigment

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0765

Tlingit war helmets featured carved figures of spirits, ancestors, or clan crests that spiritually protected and empowered the wearer for battle. Such armor gave Tlingit warriors a terrifying appearance. A helmet carved with spiritually auspicious imagery shielded the head, and a visor with eye slits covered the face. The direction of the helmet's wood grain, which runs from ear-to-ear, resisted the force of crushing blows. Body covering was made of thick, strong hide or hardwood slats tied together.



Figure, ca. 1830

Haida

Northwest Coast region

Hardwood (possibly crabapple), wool, paint

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0186

This strikingly naturalistic carved portrait of a Haida woman was made for the market and possibly had been commissioned. The subject once wore a small labret, or lip ring, now missing; these accessories signified social status among the Haida, with the highest ranking women wearing the largest labrets. The beautifully-modeled face is an extraordinary example of sensitive portraiture. The woman's head is slightly enlarged, a convention in Northwest Coast art. Her red earrings are made of wool trade yarn.

Basket, ca. 1900 – 25

Nuu-chah-nulth (Nootka)

Northwest Coast region

Red-cedar bark, bear grass, dye

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0155

Baskets had many traditional uses on the Northwest Coast where weavers sold them during the struggle to shift from subsistence to employment economies in the late 19th century. With twenty-five stitches per inch, this is a particularly fine, slightly later example.