

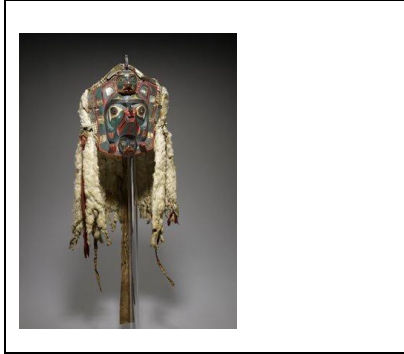
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## Title of Object

Frontlet

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## Photo of Object (optional)



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## Object Information

**Artist:** Unknown

**Culture:** Nuxalk (Bella Coola)

**Date of Object:** c. 1850

**Country:** Canada

**Accession Number:** 2008.61

**File Created:** 10/24/2016

**Material/Medium:** Wood, pigments, abalone shell, copper, ermine pelts, cotton, plant fibers, wool buttons, sea lion whiskers

**Author of File:** Bruce Robbins

**Reviewer of File:** Kara ZumBahlen

**Department:** Arts of the Americas

**Last Updated/Reviewed:** 2/15/2017

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## Tour Topics

Indigenous, Mask, Dance, Celebration, Native American, Northwest Coast, Animals/Birds, Dress, Entertainment/Music, ritual, ceremonies, Group 2, Highlights 1600-1850

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## Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

Imagine someone wearing this frontlet while dancing during an elaborate festival and ceremony...

Describe how the figure looks. How many faces?

The Nuxalk people often wore frontlets and masks- why would they do this?

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## Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)

Today, and for generations, the Nuxalk people live at the confluence of the Pacific Ocean and the Bella Coola River. The present day community is Q'umk'uts. The Nuxalk are a distinct nation and live on their primary reserve which is much smaller than their original territory. No roads came to this community until 1953. Today, a community hall is the place where potlatches and other community events are

held. The indigenous language is spoken fluently by fewer than 100 people today but with 140 learners. The language contains about 200 different vocal sounds. Other languages (such as our own) have between 36 and 48 sounds.

The Nuxalk frontlet (not a mask) is worn on the top of the head and cover down to the forehead. Worn usually by a dancer in ceremonies such as the potlatch, this frontlet has three faces: the prominent, center face is an unknown figure from Nuxalk tradition has abalone teeth that glow in firelight; a second figure above wears headgear in the shape of a bird; a third face figure below represents the spirit of the main figure. In addition to the frontlet, the dancer would be painted and wear a ceremonial costume. The Nuxalk were known for their carving and other groups (including the Kwakiutl) look to them for inspiration.

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## Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)

Nuxalk pronounced as “Nu-halk.”

The Bella Coola Valley area is rich in wildlife and plants, which provided Nuxalk peoples with food and medicinal products. Large trees, such as cedar were used for housing, canoes, clothing and many other essential items. Villages were located along river banks and river mouths in order to give ready access to these natural resources. Ooligan, a smelt-like fish, was caught by the thousands from the Bella Coola River. Nuxalk peoples processed ooligans into grease and used it for a variety of purposes, including food and as a trade item. The Nuxalkmc lived in permanent house structures. Some were built on the ground, while others were raised on posts as high as 20 feet above ground, likely for protection from floods. (Source: Bella Coola Valley Museum)

During 1862 and 1863 the Native villages in the Bella Coola Valley area were decimated by a smallpox epidemic. It has been estimated that the population was reduced by 70-90 percent. (Bella Coola Valley Museum). Before contact, the Nuxalk population is estimated to have been approximately 35,000. In 1862 the great smallpox epidemic of that year reduced the Nuxalk to only 300 survivors by 1864. Current estimates place their population at 3,000. (Wikipedia)

This horrific loss of lives led to an eventual congregation of all the area's villages at one location, Q'um'kuts. The village at Bella Coola remains today. Descendants from the villages live in Bella Coola as part of the Nuxalk First Nation. (Bella Coola Valley Museum) (Wikipedia)

Knowledge of the family history continues today. 2. The religion believe in a father God (Alhkwntam), his son (Manaakays), and a spirit deity (cmaonwas). There is also a goddess named Qamayts. Some Nuxalk became Christian because of the similarity of beliefs. (Source: Wikipedia under “Nuxalk.”)

Prior to colonization, in the Nuxalk Nation there were hundreds of different dances and songs that were performed by various individuals belonging to numerous secret societies. However, due to diseases and deaths, the smallpox epidemics of the 1860s reduced the Nuxalk population from over 50 villages to 1, the present settlement at Bella Coola. With the deaths went much of the intellectual property that demonstrates Nuxalk worldview, such as knowledge about songs, masks, stories and ancestral names. (Nuxalknation)

Cosmology: The Nuxalk believed in four worlds stacked upon each other. The Nuxalk peoples (and other groups surrounding them) lived in the center world held up by a deity who held massive ropes attached the the flat island comprising the center world. Above were two sky worlds. The first was an

inverted dome attached to the center world. Above, some of the peoples (Nuxalk and other groups) believed in a second sky world where a female deity lived. Below the center world were one or two worlds inhabited by ghosts. The ghosts would sometimes be present in the center world four days after a death. (That was a day the curtain spreading the worlds was drawn apart to allow the newly deceased to enter.) At other times the ghosts would go to the center world to secure food.

Secret Societies: Two societies existed. 1) The Sisoak society was limited to the children and certain relatives of the chiefs. Initiation rites existed to enter this society. Sisoak members were dancers and performed at many ceremonies including funeral and potlatches. Masks such as this frontlet were worn by the Sisoak dancers and the masks reflected familial ties. 2) The Kusiut society performed a ceremony annual associated with the September full moon. The ceremonies involved ancestral myths. The ceremonies included a potlatch. Members of other communities were invited and returned to their villages to give news about the ceremonies.

Potlatch: This frontlet was worn in the famous potlatch ceremonies celebrated by indigenous communities on the Northwest coast of the United States and Canada (and by interior communities with a different kind of ceremony). Potlatches are a gathering between various villages to mark significant events in the community, such as births, memorials, marriages, recognition of hereditary chief titles, to induct new members into various societies and the affirmation of ancestral names. (Nuxalk nation) At a potlatch, the grand finale of the evening is the last ceremony and celebration of the family's hard work: traditional dancing. Nuxalk cultural dances include dances for children, women, and men, as well as the mask dances. Following the evening's speeches and cultural ceremonies, a huge give-away is held for the witnesses of that family's important business. Household items, food, cash, clothing, jewelry and other items are given to all witnesses as payment for their obligation to validate the events of the potlatch. If somebody does not support the business conducted at a potlatch or feast, they are obliged to say so at the event publicly, otherwise, it is assumed that with their presence, they are upholding the business of that night. Traditionally, food and subsistence items were the primary give away items- a great way to redistribute wealth within the community. Sometimes, items of great value (such as canoes and stores of ooligan grease) were destroyed by a chief at a potlatch as a public expression of wealth and power. However, such acts were not commonplace. (Nuxalk nation)

For many years potlatches were strictly banned by both the Canadian and U.S. governments (1880s-1951) because concepts of kinship and prestige often conflicted with church teaching. During those years potlatches were disguised and seen as acceptable at Christmas.

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### **Current Mia Label Information (optional)**

Frontlets were created by most tribal groups in the Northwest Coast region, and were usually decorated with figures. They were worn with an ensemble that included a robe and dance outfit, and were used for special events like greeting important visitors and potlatches. During such ceremonies, the abalone shells of the frontlet and the whiteness of the ermine fur would glow from the fire.

On the center of this object is an unknown figure that probably derives from Bella Coola traditional stories. It has abalone canine teeth and a pronounced nose. The upper portion of the frontlet features a main figure that wears headgear in the shape of a bird. The lower figure may represent the spirit of the main figure. It is unclear whether the arms and hands are from the lower or main figure.

The Bella Coola are known for their strong carving tradition, and many tribal groups look to their work for inspiration, including their neighbors the Kwakwaka'wakw (Kwakiutl).

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### Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)

Kirk Ruth. "Tradition and Change on the Northwest Coast: The Makah, Nuuchahnulth, Southern Kwakiutl, and Nuxalk." Royal British Columbia Museum. 1986: University of Washington Press.

Holm, Bill. "The Box of Daylight: Northwest Indian Coast Art." Exhibition Catalogue, Seattle Art Museum, September 15, 1983-January 8, 1984. University of Washington Press.

Text of an older object file. (Some of the information above is taken from this file. I found the info on the IPE site months ago.) Both are posted under this object.

Nuxalk: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nuxalk>

Bella Coola Valley Museum: [http://www.bellacoolamuseum.ca/en/digital\\_heritage/nuxalk/index.php](http://www.bellacoolamuseum.ca/en/digital_heritage/nuxalk/index.php)

Potlatch (webpage of the Nuxalk Nation): <http://nuxalknation.ca/government/potlatch/>