

NC0045

Raven Rattle

Haisla or Heiltsuk (Bella Bella), c. 1880-1900

Hardwood, paint, cord

11 5/8" (29.5cm) Long

Raven rattles are one of the iconic symbols of Northwest Coast material culture. Though their essential form has remained remarkably constant, the basic image is usually expressed with a wide range of individual variations. In the characteristics of their detail and embellishment these rattles display a great variety of styles and features. The central image is that of a raven with a human on its back, sometimes accompanied by a small frog. Much more rarely one encounters unique examples that contain intriguing variations on the central image and a wide range of subsidiary figures.

According to native tradition, the raven rattle originated on the Nass River in what is now British Columbia, among the artists of the Nishga people. The earliest surviving fragments of these rattles suggest that the tradition's origin took place well before the first arrival of Europeans on the Northwest Coast in the late 1700s, and possibly several centuries before that time. From its initial birth in the cradle of Northwest Coast culture, the rattle tradition spread to neighboring tribes one by one, reaching south as far as northern Vancouver Island by the mid to late nineteenth century. The iconography of the rattles suggests that they began as the property of shamans. The exchange of shamanic, esoteric knowledge is usually indicated by a sharing of the tongue between the human figure and the bird's beak in the tail of the raven. At least by the middle of the nineteenth century they had become the preferred rattle of the chiefly class, carried along with the accoutrements of the peace dance or feather dance, which was dominated by the ermine headdress and its carved wooden frontlet.

Many raven rattles depict the tail feathers extending toward the handle, and include a long-beaked bird face looking toward the human. This rattle contains the time-honored and alternate image of a raven in flight with its tail feathers turned to extend forward, one of the essential variations encountered in the basic form. A two-dimensional face with a sculptural recurved beak looks toward the handle, while another facelike formline structure forms the base of the tail feathers, the ends of which are grasped by the human's hands. This second face is one of the most unusual features of this rattle, as most examples of this type exhibit only the vertical face with the recurved beak and simple feather shapes above it.

The human figure reclines with its knees and feet tucked beneath the raven's tail feathers and its head resting on the abbreviated 'ears' of the bird. Ravens have small feathers on either side of the rear of their heads that they can raise at certain times, and which look something like small, upward extending ears. This is likely the source of the squared off ear shapes in the rattles. The tongue of the human figure extends out from its mouth, though in this example it does not connect to the beak of the tail face and there is no frog or other figure on the rattle. This extended but abbreviated tongue is one of the other unusual features of this rattle, yet it does not clearly appear to have been broken off from a longer example. In other versions of this type with the reversed tail feathers, the human's

tongue often connects to the mouth of a small frog poised on its chest and belly. There is neither any visible trace nor apparent sign of such a subsidiary figure that is now missing. The human figure's rump and elbows touch the back of the raven, and the raven's wing feathers sweep back in line with the handle of the rattle. These are central features of the raven rattle tradition, common to many examples of the type.

On the breast of the raven, another two-dimensional formline face is relief-carved in place, this one also featuring a sculptural recurved beak, which a regular feature of these rattles. The wide mouth below the arch of the beak is a point of reversal, being also the mouth of a second formline face that is opposing the first one, seen with the handle pointing away from the viewer. This is an unusual composition for the lower half of such a rattle, and is clear evidence that an inventive carver was the maker of this example. Another unique feature of this rattle is the use of an uncommon design element composed of rows of short, unpainted, parallel lines. These appear in several areas, including the underside of the wings (which are painted red), in three or four zones along the centerline of the raven's neck and breast, on the tops of the wings, and on the tail feathers (the last two design areas are both painted black). This kind of texture-like line work in the painted areas is sometimes done as one color painted on another, and is then referred to as dashing. In that form it is often seen in objects from the Coast Tsimshian area in the mid-nineteenth century. This related form, employing unpainted areas of dashing, suggests an origin on the outskirts of the Tsimshian region, such as among the Haisla of the northern British Columbia mainland or the Heiltsuk of the central British Columbia coast. The style of the painting and relief carving in general also points to these areas as the most likely original source of this rattle, probably in the timeframe of 1880-1900.

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