

WC 8808021

**Headdress with Wooden Frontlet**

Tlingit, c. 1820-1850

Wood, abalone shell, paint, ermine pelts, sea lion whiskers, flicker feathers, baleen, wool felt

Frontlet: 7 1/4 inches High

Provenance: Mr. Hyde, Clapham, London, 1934  
James Hooper Collection, London, #H1469  
Christie's Auction, London, November 9, 1976, Lot #201  
Alexander Gallery  
Epic Fine Arts Co./Masco Corp.

Headdress draped with ermine pelts and embellished with a carved wooden frontlet are said by Native oral history to have originated among the Nishga people of the Nass River in Northern British Columbia. Just how long ago this tradition began is unknown, the use of frontlet headdresses had spread among all the northern Northwest Coast First nations, including the Tlingit, Haida, and other Tsimshian groups (of which the Nishga are one). The complete headgear is composed of a bent-baleen-strip frame, tied together with twine or sinew and partially covered with felt or stroud cloth, ermine pelts (and sometimes swanskin) sewn to the frame, and the wooded frontlet attached by sewing to the front of the headdress. In some old Tlingit examples, one sees the skin of male mallard duck heads with their iridescent feathers attached to the headdress below the frontlet. In many Tlingit, Haida, and other examples from the northern coast, red-shafted flicker tail feathers are tied to the frame alongside the central carving (as seen here) or fitted into holes in the top edge of the frontlet. As seen in this example, a 'nest' of sea lion whiskers that is tied upright to the baleen frame always finishes the assemblage. The stiff, springy whiskers serve to filter the tufts of eagle down that are placed in the top of the headdress as a sign of peace, causing them to drift to the ground as the dancers bob and toss their heads in movement to the accompanying songs. In some later headdresses from Vancouver Island and the central coast, the sea lion whiskers were occasionally substituted with thinly carved baleen strips of amber color.

This headdress, with its frontlet exquisitely carved to represent a beaver, has several characteristics that suggest it is an early creation. The use of baleen in the frame is one indication, as many later examples employed thin splints of wood or small, split branches to form the headdress frame. In the carving and inlay of the frontlet are other indicators of considerable age. The rhythmic, parallel grooving on the rim that surrounds the central figure is an early characteristic, one that gave way to the total use of abalone shell inlay and no grooving on the rims of later frontlets. Here, the abalone shell inlay is confined to the figure itself, having been fitted into the ears, eyes, teeth, tail, forefoot pads, forelegs and shins of the beaver sculpture. It seems that in the earlier days of the Euro-American contact period, abalone shell was a much rarer commodity. As increased traffic in the fur trade brought greater quantities of this highly prized shell to the Northwest Coast from California and Mexico, carvers began to inlay shell pieces into the

thin rims that surround the central figure(s) in the majority of frontlets. The earlier style of grooving the surface of this rim appears to come from an ancient finishing technique once applied to the surfaces of bent-corner boxes, bent-corner bowls, and other objects. Fine grooving was also used as a texture device in certain areas of the relief carving of two-dimensional formline designs on a variety of early historic decorated objects.

The sculpture of the beaver itself is also comparable to early frontlets collected by Russian fur traders and other European explorers and traders. The subtle, oval carvings of the nostril form, the shapes and inlay of the teeth, and the position and sculptural handling of the limbs of the beaver are all characteristics that can be seen in Tlingit frontlets known to be from early documented collections. The overall shallowness from front to back of the carving is also an earlier sculptural characteristic, which gave way to a deeper dimensionality that can be seen in many middle to late nineteenth-century examples. The carver of this frontlet has captured the beaver image in a confident and accomplished style, one that features bold sculptural form with subtle definition and excellent, smooth finish. As with all such headdress carvings, the sculptural form and characteristics are intended to be seen when the object is in motion, bobbing and shaking in traditionally established movements on the head of the inspired dancer.

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