

WC 9105003

'Bear's Ear's Headdress'

Tlingit, c. 1860-1880

Bear hide, abalone shell, wood, paint, horsehair

9" High x 20 1/2" Wide

Provenance: Sotheby's Auction, NYC, May 21, 1991, Sale 6181, Lot 142  
Epic Fine Arts Co./Masco Corp.

This type of headdress is not common among the varieties of Tlingit ceremonial headgear, but there are a number of examples in museum collections and headdresses of this type continue to be worn in contemporary Tlingit rituals. They show a distinct visual relationship with similar headgear used by Ainu shamans of the Bear Cult, from far across the Pacific Rim opposite Southeast Alaska. Their use by at least certain Tlingit shamans is documented in several carved objects and at least one nineteenth century photograph. The Yakutat shaman named Tekic, of the Tequedi, or bear clan, was photographed in about 1888 seated on the steps of the bear House wearing such a headpiece (illustrated in *Tangible Visions: Northwest Coast Indian Shamanism and its Art*, A. Wardwell, The Monacelli Press, 1996, page 30). The Tekic headpiece was adorned with images of the Sun, a symbol for the source of his spirit powers. A well-known shaman's grave guardian figure (collected at Yakutat, Alaska) was sculpted wearing such a headpiece, and has been illustrated in several publication. (These include: *Objects of Bright Pride: Northwest Coast Indian Art from the American Museum of Natural History*, A. Wardwell, CIAR/AFA, 1978, page 89; and *Tangible Visions*, see above, page 312). The former reference also includes illustrations of two similar headpieces (pages 15 and 16). One is made of engraved copper sewn to a cloth-covered rawhide backing, and the other includes carved wooden eyes and a mouth/nostril feature that are also attached to a cloth-covered rawhide backing, to which is sewn numerous pieces of abalone shell. The former includes the collector's notation that it was "part of a chief's ceremonial costume and was worn for fighting". The latter is said to represent a bear.

Contemporary use of this type of headgear is as a clan ceremonial headdress, rather than as shaman's paraphernalia. Perhaps the shaman's use of such a headpiece was limited to those who also held the title of clan leader, those whom we would call chiefs. (Or, in the one case, the guardian of the grave of such a dual-titled person). Historically, certain shamanic practitioners were said to have been both chiefs and shamans.

This example is cut from untanned bear's hide (rawhide), left stiff so that it would stand upright. It was cut from two 'opposite' pieces of hide (like matching earrings) so that the pattern of the hair on each would be symmetrical. The two pieces were then sewn together to form the headpiece. Large pieces of abalone shell were sewn to the surface in more-or-less symmetrical patterns on each side of the object. These pieces may have been recycled from another object or objects, as their shapes do not directly relate to the form of this headpiece. A small, carved wooden 'copper' shape was attached to each side

of the headpiece. These are painted with simple 'daubed' shapes about the perimeter of each copper, with a circular shape on the coppers' face. Coppers were symbols of concentrated wealth and social prestige that were highly regarded by clan leaders. Tufts of light and dark horsehair stream from the ear-forms to each side.

Such a piece of headgear lends a tall and regal appearance to its wearer, and, coupled with the inherent prestige of some of its symbolic forms and decoration, conveys the social status and influence of its owners in the context of ceremony.

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