



Rattle in raven form

On display

Title/Description: Rattle in raven form

Object Type: Musical instrument

Materials: Leather, Paint, Stone, Wood

Measurements: h. 318 x w. 100 x d. 120 mm

Accession Number: 831

Historic Period: Mid 19th century

Production Place: North America, Northwest Coast, The Americas

Cultural Group: Haida, Tlingit

Credit Line: Purchased with support from Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1982

Rattles in the form of birds were used throughout the Northwest Coast. Some were collected during Cook's visit to the Nootka in 1778 (King, 1981 : pls. 49-51), and an example similar to this one was collected among the Tlingit in 1805 by Lisiansky (1814: pl. 1e; Siebert and Forman, 1967: 59,60). The bird most frequently depicted is the raven, as here, with a 'hawk' mask carved on its breast and a reclining figure on its back. This figure has its tongue extending into the beak of another bird, whose head forms the tail of the raven. The extended tongue occurs often in Northwest Coast art. In some cases it has sexual significance, but here it is likely to be connected with concepts of the tongue as the locus of life force; the acquisition of animal tongues and their associated spiritual power was a crucial part of a shaman's vision quest (see de Laguna, 1972: 676-80).

Raven rattles are popularly classified as chief's rattles, in contrast to shaman's rattles, which depict other kinds of bird. However, raven rattles have been found in shaman's graves (de Laguna, 1972: pls. 176, 187; Wardwell, 1978: no. 52), and reliable first-hand evidence for a firm classification is lacking, as indeed is information about the symbolic significance of the scenes carved on the backs of rattles. In the second half of the nineteenth century, raven rattles were part of the standard ceremonial accoutrements of chiefs throughout the northern coast, along with Chilkat blankets and dance head-dresses. However, this may reflect a change of emphasis, where the rattle's significance as a marker of high status superseded a former, shamanic, importance, about which we have little information.

This rattle is well preserved, and the figure, with its bear-like head and claws, is larger and more sculpturally accomplished than many other examples. Besides the Lisiansky rattle, which also retains its strong colours, this one is similar to an example collected among the Haida (probably in the 1870s) which is illustrated by Niblack (1888: pls. liii-iv).

Steven Hooper, 1997

(Entry taken from *Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection catalogue, Vol. 2: Pacific, African and Native North American Art*, edited by Steven Hooper, Yale University Press, 1997).

Exhibitions

'Elisabeth Frink: Humans and Other Animals', Sainsbury Centre, Norwich, 13/10/2018 - 24/02/2019

'Empowering Art: Indigenous Creativity and Activism from North America's Northwest Coast', Sainsbury Centre, Norwich, 12/3/23 - 30/7/23

Provenance

Formerly in the collection of James Hooper, no. 1455

