

Richard Hunt, Kwakwaka'wakw (Kwakiutl) (British Columbia, Canada) born 1951
Transformation Mask, 1993
Cedar, pigment, cloth, string, and wood
H.13 x W12¼ (closed), D.20½ inches
The Anne and Hadlai Hull Fund, 93.42

Theme

Carved wooden transformation masks are worn for important religious ceremonies and dances of the Kwakwaka'wakw (kwak-wak-ya-wak) people. The images on this mask identify the artist's family clan and ancestors. When worn during a dance, the images also re-create ancient myths that are sacred to the Northwest Coast peoples.

Background

One of the world's richest natural environments, the Northwest Coast region of North America consists of a narrow strip of densely forested land less than 150 miles wide, surrounded by snow-capped mountains, islands, and ocean inlets. It stretches along the Pacific Ocean from the Alaskan Panhandle to northern California. In the past, the native people who lived in this area obtained their food, clothing, and shelter from their natural surroundings. The sea provided abundant fish, the basis of their economy, and the land offered bountiful forests teeming with deer, birds, bears, and other wildlife. From the massive cedar, fir, and spruce trees of the forests, the native people built houses, canoes, storage chests, masks, implements and other ceremonial and functional objects.

Before the time of European settlement, the Northwest Coast Indians developed complex social and religious systems. Many of their sacred practices and ceremonies expressed gratitude for the plentiful gifts of nature and a desire to maintain prosperity and well-being. They also manifested a close relationship with animals. Central to these ceremonies were distinctive art objects adorned with images of animal symbols, sometimes referred to as animal "crests." These crests represented families or clans, groups of people who shared the same ancestors. An animal crest was considered the property of a family or clan. The crest identified the members' ancestors and, in return for proper respect and ceremony, protected them. Such protective qualities, similar to those of the *Lar* in ancient Roman times, were important for the group's sense of security and protection.

Much of the art produced by the Northwest Coast people, as well as their ceremonial activities, were intended to proclaim the wealth and status of important families, particularly the wealthy hereditary nobility. These people were obligated to give away their material goods in elaborate ceremonies called potlatches, which were held in the winter to celebrate a special event, such as a wedding or a birth. Many decorated objects were made for these potlatches, including doorposts and totems for the house, ceremonial regalia such as masks and costumes, and numerous implements and eating utensils. All called attention to the ancestry, greatness and wealth of the family and the man who was its head. By giving away his possessions, a family leader shared his wealth with the community, strengthened his leadership, and gained the respect of others. In addition to displaying wealth and status, the potlatch was a way to pass

titles and privileges on to family heirs and to redistribute goods within a stratified society. It was important to participate in these feasts, and people attending them often traveled great distances.

Transformation Mask

Among the southern groups of the Northwest Coast Indians, the Kwakwaka'wakw people are known for their elaborate ceremonies using a range of complex objects. This transformation mask was made by Richard Hunt, a 20th-century Kwakwaka'wakw artist. While this particular mask was made for sale, Hunt made a similar mask for family dances at a winter potlatch and wore it himself while participating in the ceremonies. Transformation masks are worn to illustrate myths of animal ancestry, to show animal crests owned by an individual, and to reveal the interaction of human and animal spirits. Their use is rooted in ancient Kwakwaka'wakw traditions. According to Kwakwaka'wakw creation stories, there was once a time when birds, fish, animals and humans differed only in skin covering and had the ability to transform themselves at will. All living beings were unified and animals could take on human form, just as humans could become animals, birds, fish, and mythical creatures. These ideas still guide Kwakwaka'wakw religious traditions.

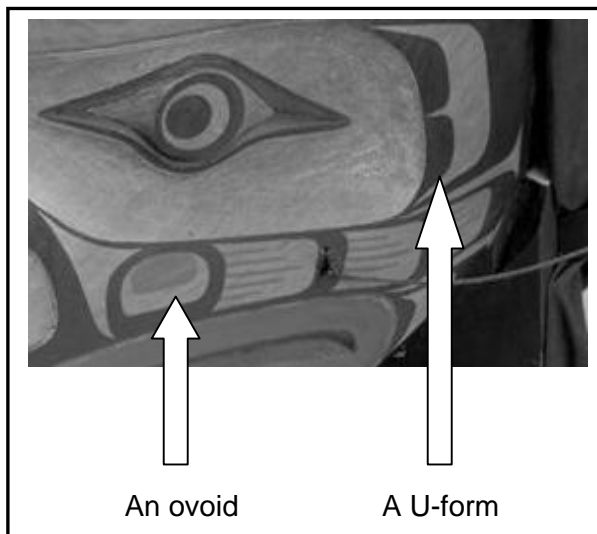
To enact such transformations in ceremonies, dancers wear transformation masks such as this. A transformation mask is a spectacular sculptural form constructed with moveable parts that open and close. As part of the dance, the wearer dramatically reveals the images of different animal and human spirits both inside and outside the mask. At the beginning of the dance, this mask would be closed, showing the image of the raven that is represented on the outside. During key moments of the dance, however, the dancer pulls hidden strings to open the mask and reveal the carved images inside of a human face flanked by a two-headed serpent. Through a combination of movement, dance, and sculpture, the interrelationship of different spirits is revealed with great theatricality. According to Kwakwaka'wakw belief, when dancers are wearing these masks, they themselves are transformed into the spirits represented on the mask.

Portrayed on this mask's exterior, Raven is a central character in Northwest Coast Indian mythology. In many stories, he is the creator of the physical world and the bringer of light. Raven has supernatural powers, and is also a "trickster" who can transform himself into anything at any time, often playing mischievous tricks on others.

The mask opens to display an image of *Sisuitl* (SEE-shoe), a two-headed serpent often associated with the protection of warriors. *Sisuitl* is a strong, invincible character whose glance alone can kill. The serpent is believed to occasionally eat those who see him, which may explain why *Sisuitl* is often represented with a human head between two profile serpent heads, as it is here. Other human features are the upraised hands painted on the interior wings of the mask next to the serpent heads. Together the images on the mask refer to the transformations of human to Raven, Raven to human, human to *Sisuitl*, and *Sisuitl* to human.

Although Raven and *Sisuitl* are traditional Kwakwaka'wakw images, they also are personally significant to the artist, Richard Hunt. Raven is the special animal and main crest of his father's clan. *Sisuitl* is the special animal and main crest of his mother's clan. Worn at family dances, a mask like this one represents Hunt's family history by showing his ancestry.

This mask combines two- and three-dimensional techniques, using both relief carving and painted design. The distinctive Northwest Coast style of decoration is displayed here in the bold linear designs and forms. The painted images are not naturalistic, like those of the portraits in this unit, since they do not attempt to represent subjects as they appear in nature. Rather, they are stylized, using simplified geometric and organic forms and abstract designs to represent animal and human images. The artist animates the surface with an intricate design using two basic shapes—the ovoid and the U-form. These shapes, integral to Northwest Coast artistic tradition, are found throughout the mask in a variety of configurations. Examples of the ovoid are seen in the serpent's eyes and nose, the palms of the human hands, the man's forehead, and the designs above and below the raven's beak. The U-form is repeated in many segments of the serpent's body, as well as on the chin of the human face. While many of these forms seem to represent certain animal or human features, others simply create a pleasing design. The lines used to define these forms are precisely delineated with flowing movement. The long curving body and segmented forms of the serpent suggest undulating scales and slithering movement. Combined with its sharp teeth and penetrating eyes, *Sisuitl* appears to be a fierce and powerful creature. In painting the designs, Hunt used traditional Kwakwaka'wakw colors of black, red-brown, and green, which are applied to emphasize important features such as eyes, nostrils, hands, and teeth.



In addition to the two-dimensional painted images, the artist also uses three-dimensional techniques. The mask's sense of dynamism and movement are enhanced by the carving of the complex surface, both inside and out, with various curving contours and deep recessions. Raven has an extremely long, straight beak with a bluntly curving, turned-down tip. The eyes, nose, and mouth of the central human face inside the mask are deeply cut, which, combined with their bright colors, makes these features appear even more striking. The facial features have openings through which the dancer can see and breathe as he dances. The dancer's body would be draped with sheets of red or black cloth to which feathers are sometimes attached. He would be accompanied by the sounds of drums and singing. Just imagine the visual impact of this mask being worn in a dance, as the forceful flow of lines in the painted and carved images are echoed by the dancer's flowing movement.

Technique

Richard Hunt uses traditional Kwakwaka'wakw techniques when carving and painting masks. This mask is made from red cedar, a soft wood favored by Kwakwaka'wakw artists for its clear and even grain. Woodcarving is a form of subtractive sculpture, in which the form is created by carving away wood from the log. The Yoruba *Beaded Crown*, on the other hand, was made by an additive process in which many different components were added or assembled. Hunt used traditional hand tools such as an adze, chisel, and curved knife. When the carving was completed, holes were drilled along the sides of the hollow shell to insert pegs and strings used to maneuver the mask when it was worn. Hunt then painted the mask with acrylic (plastic-based) paints. Before these commercial paints were available, Kwakwaka'wakw artists used

natural earth pigments, such as red ochre, charcoal, and blue-green clay. Hunt, however, like many contemporary artists, now prefers to use acrylic paints because they dry more quickly.

Artist

Richard Hunt is a contemporary Kwakwaka'wakw artist who comes from a family of internationally respected artists. He was born in 1951 in Alert Bay, British Columbia, but has lived most of his life in Victoria. Hunt began carving when he was 13 years old, receiving lessons from his father, who was taught by Richard's grandfather. Like the traditions of the Hmong and Yoruba cultures, Kwakwaka'wakw art forms have been transmitted from generation to generation. This has occurred despite attempts by the Canadian government to assimilate the Northwest Coast peoples into the predominant white culture. A government ban of the potlatch ceremony existed from 1884 to 1951, but many Kwakiutl artists, like Hunt's grandfather, continued to make traditional ceremonial items, keeping these art forms alive for future generations. Today Kwakwaka'wakw art is undergoing a great revival, and Richard Hunt is a part of it.

In 1973 Hunt began work at the Royal British Columbia Museum, first as an apprentice carver under his father and then as chief carver, a position he held for 12 years. In 1986 he began a career as a free-lance artist, working in diverse media in both two and three dimensions. He is highly acclaimed for his wood sculpture, particularly traditional ceremonial items such as masks, rattles, and bowls. His work has been widely exhibited and is represented in collections around the world.

In addition to his accomplishments as an artist, Hunt is an experienced ritualist and dancer, performing at many potlatches, feasts, and public displays. In 1991 he became the first native artist to be awarded the prestigious Order of British Columbia by the Canadian government. A pivotal figure in preserving the traditions of his people, Hunt lives up to his Indian name, Gwe-la-yo-gwe-la-gya-les, which means "a man that travels around the world giving." Living both in the traditional and modern worlds, he enjoys golf in his leisure time, as well as competitive sports such as football, soccer, and basketball.

Suggested Questions

1. This mask is worn by a Northwest Coast Indian dancer. It is called a "transformation mask." What does "transformation" mean? Why do you think it is called that? What does this tell you about the function of the mask? In what ways do you think the mask "transforms?" (*In a physical sense, it opens up; also the wearer is transformed spiritually into the animals shown on the mask.*)
2. How do you think the mask is worn? How do you think the wearer opens the mask? How can you tell? Look at the open mask. How do you think the wearer sees and breathes?
3. Look at the mask when it is closed. What animal do you see? What features does the raven have that help identify him? What kinds of lines and shapes did Richard Hunt use to represent the features of the raven? How do the colors help emphasize the bird's features? Look at the open mask. What animals do you see? Where do you see a

serpent? How can you tell which animal is the serpent? Where is the serpent's body? Where is its head? How has Richard Hunt represented the serpent's scales? What shapes did he use? (*A U-form.*) Where do you see a human? Besides the face of a human, what other human features do you see?

4. Raven is known as a "trickster." What has Richard Hunt done to portray him in this way? What do you think the serpent's personality is like? Why do you say that?
5. What kinds of lines and shapes have been repeated on each animal? What features do the animals have in common? Why might common features be important to the function of the transformation mask? Why do you think all of these animals are represented on one mask? What could the purpose be?
6. Is the transformation mask symmetrical or asymmetrical? Why do you say that?
7. How do you think the mask was made? What materials were used to make it? What kinds of tools do you think were used? Do you think the process was subtractive or additive? Point to areas where you see evidence of carving.
8. How long do you think it would take to make this mask? Why do you say that?
9. How heavy do you think the mask is? What would it feel like to wear it?
10. In what ways does this mask reflect the natural environment of the Northwest Coast Indians? How does it reflect the mythology or religious beliefs of these people? Based on this mask, what kind of relationship do you think the Northwest Coast Indians have with animals? With the environment? Why do you say that?
11. What is the purpose of the black cloth? (*To help conceal the wearer.*) How is this similar to the Yoruba *Beaded Crown*?
12. This mask is worn for special ceremonies involving movement and dance. What kind of impact do you think this mask would have on onlookers? Would they be surprised? Delighted? Afraid? Bored?
13. Are there any celebrations or important events in your culture that involve masks or costumes?
14. Like needlework in Hmong cultures, Kwakwaka'wakw artforms are passed from generation to generation. Are there any traditions or skills that have been passed down in your family? What are they?

15. A group of Kwakwaka'wakw people who share the same ancestors are identified by their family "crest." What animals do you think are Richard Hunt's family crests? Does your family have a special crest to identify them? If so, what does it look like?
16. The images of animal crests on the mask identify the wearer's ancestors. Do any other items of attire in this set identify the person wearing them? Which ones?
17. One of the functions of the potlatch ceremony is to display wealth and status. How is this similar to the Yoruba *Beaded Crown*?
18. From 1884 to 1951 the Canadian government banned the potlatch ceremony. What kind of effect do you think this had on Kwakwaka'wakw traditions? Why do you think the government imposed the ban? Do you think it was fair? Why or why not?
19. Although traditionally transformation masks are made for ceremony, this one was made for commercial sale. How does this reflect change in the culture? In what way is this similar to what has happened to the Hmong artistic tradition?