

## Bella Coola Frontlet

Accession Number: 2008.61



Decorative Arts and Utilitarian Objects, Mask |

Medium: Wood, pigments, abalone shell, copper, ermine pelts, cotton, plant fibers, wool, buttons, sea lion whiskers

Size: 19 7/8 x 10 1/2 x 10 in. (50.48 x 26.67 x 25.4 cm) (without ties)

Creation Place: North America, Canada, Northwest Coast region, British Columbia, Northwest Coast region

Culture: Bella Coola (Nuxalk), North America, Canada, Northwest Coast region, British Columbia

Style: 19th century

Frontlets were created by most tribal groups in the Northwest Coast region, and were usually decorated with figures. They were worn with an ensemble that included a robe and dance outfit, and were used for special events like greeting important visitors and potlatches. During the ceremonial, the abalone shells of the frontlet and the whiteness of the ermine fur would glow. On the center of this object is an unknown figure that probably derives from the Bella Coola's traditional stories. It has abalone canine teeth and a pronounced nose. The upper portion of the

frontlet features a figure that wears headgear in the shape of a bird. The lower figure may represent the spirit of the main figure. It is unclear whether the arms and hands are from the lower or main figure. The Bella Coola are known for their strong carving tradition, and many tribal groups looked at their work for inspiration, including their neighbors the Kwakwaka'wakw (Kwakiutl).

The Bella Coola were a fishing, hunting and gathering society. Salmon and eulachon ("candlefish") fishing in the Bella Coola River continues to be important. Each year, eulachons are netted, rendered into grease and traded. The fish are smoke-dried in the traditional manner, canned and frozen.

Through marriage, a network of descent groups developed that linked the villages. Most people chose to live in their fathers' villages. However, they were also related to their mothers' descent groups, if different. The multiple-family cedar-plank dwellings were large enough to house as many as 6 couples and their children. Members of the household, which included elderly relatives, supported one another in potlatching and economic pursuits.

The most prominent characteristic of Bella Coola life was its extremely rich and complex ceremonialism dominated by the POTLATCH and 2 secret societies, the *sisaok* and the *kusiut*. Membership in the *sisaok* was limited to the children and certain relatives of chiefs. Initiation included a period of seclusion, followed by a public display of a masked figure representing the initiate's crest. Members performed at potlatches and funerals and occasionally at less important ceremonies.

Bella Coola winter ceremonials were dominated by the *kusiut*. Each member possessed a special *kusiut* name and had a supernatural patron whose dance he or she imitated.

For the native peoples of the northwest coast, masks make the supernatural world visible. Masked dancers dramatize ancestral heroes' encounters with supernatural creatures, enhancing their families' prestige.

In Bella Coola myths, animals could assume human form, and this mask probably represents that possibility. The raven is an important mythological figure, a trickster combining mischief and benevolence.

### **Cosmology and Spirituality:**

The Bella Coola believed that there were four worlds, stacked one upon another. The elders at the end of the nineteenth century did speak of a second underworld. The Bella Coola people lived in the center world, above which existed two sky worlds. Below the human world the one or two ghost worlds were located.

The center world was a flat, circular island that was supported by a supernatural being that held large ropes attached to the edges of the island. They believed that earthquakes were the result of this supernatural being adjusting his grip on the massive ropes.

The Bella Coola people strongly believed in *animism*, and that the many spirits assisted with tasks and supplied insightful thoughts to those with proper respect. They also believed that the

animals were able to transform at will to any other being or object, and deserved much respect. The Bella Coola believed that the supernatural powers required their prayers, offerings, as well as ceremonial chastity followed by ritual sexual intercourse. Living the proper lifestyle would help ensure their safety and success.

Above the Bella Coola world existed two sky worlds, the first likened unto an inverted dome that rested on the edges of their world. Atop of this first sky world was a flat plane, where many deities lived in a large house called *nusmata*, or '*place of myths, legends, and stories*'. In this greathouse the supreme deity also resided, since before time.

On top of the first sky world was another, which served as the final resting place for spirits that died in the first although the belief in this second world was only shared among two Bella Coola families. This second sky realm was thought to be like the prairies, lacking trees and with a constant wind. In the east of this land was the house of the female deity, the 'dear one' or *qumayc*. She was responsible for sickness and death when she visited the human world, and was thought to have battled the mountains long ago, reducing them to their present size.

Located below the human world were two under worlds, inhabited by ghosts. These ghosts could be heard whistling or singing near the burial site on the fourth day after a death, since at this time the curtain separating the two worlds was drawn aside to allow the newly deceased to enter. The ghosts were not able to gather enough food in their realm, and therefore needed to visit the human world often.

The ghosts in the first under world were able to travel to the first skyworld to be reborn to be sent back to the earth by the deities. If the ghosts were unfortunate enough to die a second death, they would then pass down to the lowest under world to never return.

Another realm existed under the oceans, and was thought to be similar to the human world. It was believed that the fish and sea mammals lived and existed in human form in villages underwater.

### **Ceremonial Traditions:**

The Bella Coola culture was rich in ceremonialism, and involved potlatches and two secret societies called the Sisaok and the Kusiut. The ceremonies were held from October to March.

The membership in the Sisaok society; the society of chiefs, was restricted to the relatives and children of certain chiefs. The members owned Sisaok names and were able to perform an associated Sisaok dance. The Bella Coola obtained many of their Sisaok prerogatives through marriage with the Bella Bella members.

The Sisaok dances were performed at funerals, potlatches, and a few other occasions during village gatherings. The Sisaok dancers wore masks that represented the dancer's crest, and performed when an ancestral or Sisaok name was validated with the distribution of food and wealth.

The initiates of the Sisaok society wore a headdress, a blanket decorated with pendant weasel skins and a collar of dyed red cedar bark. The headdress had a small mask affixed to a headband of swan skin with many sealion whiskers extending upwards. 'Eagle down was placed within the 'cage' of whiskers. As the dancer moved, the eagle down drifted from the headdress.

The second society, the Kusiut society, started their preparations for the ceremonies on the fourth day after the September moon was full. It was believed that at this time, a special canoe carrying a supernatural being left the land of the salmon people and traveled up the Bella Coola River. As the canoe traveled up the river, it was believed that other supernatural beings joined the trip and performed the Kusiut dances while waiting for the arrival of the Kusiut society leader.

The young initiates's face was painted black, and they wore a blanket, anklets, cedar bark collar, headdress and wristlets of dyed cedar bark. The relatives of the initiate were required to distribute gifts in order to validate the initiate's Kusiut name.

The first three days of the Kusiut ceremony involved the composition of songs for the dancers and carving of masks to be used. On the fourth day, the young initiate watched the dramatic representations of supernatural beings that were performed by the masked dancers. The masks were usually burned after the ceremonies finished.

Some of the masks used in the Kusiut dances include the Thunder, Echo, Laughter, and HokHokw (a supernatural cannibal bird) masks. The Kusiut dancers also made use of small wooden whistles, bellows and small carved wooden figures representing animals, birds or humans.

Potlatches were held and guests invited to witness rites associated with an ancestral myth, and for the validation of prerogatives by the means of distribution of goods. Potlatches were also given for the strengthening of the host's name and position within the house, the repurchase of a wife by the relatives of the bride, and the assigning of ancestral names to children.

Important events observed during potlatches included the destruction and rebuilding of a cedar plank house, the raising of a pole, and the return of an adolescent girl to the village after their year of restricted activities following the first menstruation.

Potlatches were often held in October when there was still an abundance of food from the summer months of gathering. Guests from outside the village were invited to certain potlatches to witness and elevate the status of the host. These guests would then bring the news of the hosts new status to their distant villages. This is the reason why guests from hostile villages were on occasion invited to Bella Coola potlatches.

### **Questions:**

How would it feel to wear this mask?

Would you like to participate in the ceremony in which this mask was used?

Or would you like to observe their sacred traditions?

Do the carved images convey a sense of mystery?

What more would you like to learn about this culture and their traditions?