

Basic Detail Report



Transformation Mask

Date

c. 1879

Medium

wood, copper, mammal hair, cotton, resin

Description

opening face mask: hawk/mosquito: wood: outer shell a hawk, with copper eye pieces. painted black, and white with red beak and brows. fringe of brown hair, top and sides. beak opens down centre, line of old resin on either side, probably for affixing down. crown folds up reveals

green human face inside, brown hair, painted black brows and moustache. collar of 12 segments around face, sharks painted on, wood and canvas. 3 red painted struts at back. line of resin also on corners of hat. the double human-animal nature associated with clan origin myths. one of Canada's great national treasures, this North-west Coast mask can be transformed from the outer image of an eagle to the inner image of a supernatural being in human form. this is accomplished by pulling an elaborate set of cords attached to hinged panels that extend to form a corona. at the moment of transformation, the performer turned his back to the audience to conceal the action and heighten the mystery. the flickering light of the fire around which he danced further enhanced the dramatic effect. the ghostlike faces painted on the corona probably represent the souls of the owner's family in the underworld awaiting rebirth. their incarnation was controlled by the supernatural being, whose face was revealed only during these secret winter ceremonies. the human hair surrounding the inner face probably came from an enemy, thus increasing the power of the mask. Israel Wood Powell, the first deputy commissioner of Indian Affairs for British Columbia, collected the mask in the Queen Charlotte Islands (Haida Gwaii) in 1879. it shows the stylistic features of the Bella Bella (Heiltsuk) people, who live on the coast midway between the Haida and the Bella Coola (Nuxalk). it may have come into the hands of a northern Haida chief via intertribal trading of ceremonial treasures, which was common among the most powerful chiefs of the coastal tribes. notes in 'Haida Art' - this spectacular transformation mask, when closed, represents an Eagle or Thunderbird; open. it portrays the Moon. Human hair attachments add to the drama of the powerfully serene face of a supernatural being. the transformation of the mask is accomplished by pulling cords attached to the hinged panels that extend to form the corona."

Dimensions

Other: 86 × 101 × 33 cm (33 7/8 × 39 3/4 × 13 in.)