



Antler War Club

Tsimshian, c. 1750-1800

20" Long

Caribou antler, abalone shell, cordage, brass pins

Collected by the Rev. W. H. Collison, northern British Columbia, nineteenth century

Donald Ellis Gallery

Antler clubs are among the most remarkable of Northwest Coast objects, and, along with carved bone 'soul catchers', are among those objects that are iconic of Tsimshian arts and culture. Sometimes referred to as slave killers, and evidently at one time employed as such, these impressive weapons were the prized possessions of Tsimshian chiefs. They appear to have a great antiquity on the British Columbia mainland, and most likely originated among Athabaskan-speaking peoples of the continental interior, where caribou are common. The club style migrated to the coast through major river valleys such as the Nass and Skeena, their size and surface decoration increasing through time. Small-scale versions of these clubs have been excavated from archaeological sites near Prince Rupert, on the northern coast of British Columbia, and have been dated at 100-250 AD (*Prehistoric Art of the Northwest Coast*, MacDonald, 1983:112). Skillfully embellished historical clubs of this type are nonetheless relatively rare from the coastal area, and many of these exhibit a great deal of age and use, as does this example.

The zoomorphic images carved on these clubs vary widely in type, relative age, and artist's style. The bird images, of which this is an early example, are perhaps the most often encountered. This may be the result of the clubs' tradition as a prerogative of certain clans, though without cultural information to verify this, one cannot be certain. The head of this club is carved in the form of a raven's head and beak, as indicated by the straight mandibles, though foreshortened from nature in the interest of strength. The long neck, which spans the distance between two carved tines of the antler, is sculpted with the trachea exposed. Though a defined trachea can be seen on other antler clubs, this one is exceptional in that the trachea is completely separated from the body, pierced through between it and the neck. The exposed trachea may be a metaphor for vulnerability in the

face of such a weapon. The cylindrical trachea in fact broke through long ago, and was skillfully repaired with tiny brass pins.

Finely engraved formline designs of the bird's wings flow down the shaft of the club, embellished with inlaid pieces of iridescent blue abalone shell. Curiously, two sets of taloned feet appear in the design composition. One pair embellishes each side of the striking lobe at the front of the club, the legs reaching forward from an ovoid form within the bird's body. The other pair extends upward on each side of the shaft at the top of the grip area, a small abalone shell ovoid inlaid at their base. Some examples of raven images include both raven's legs and human hands beneath the wings, though this does not appear to be the case in this sculpture. This is likely the artist representing the two legs of the raven on each side of the club, and not in fact four legs on the raven.

The notch at the front of the striking lobe of the club was made to hold a thin blade of copper or steel, a terrifying prospect when added to an already formidable weapon. The row of ovoids and U-forms engraved along the spine of the club ends in a larger ovoid in the tail of the raven, the U-shaped feathers of which have been worn down below the engraving. Advanced wear in this type of harder material indicates a great deal of age and handling. Since the occasions on which a clan heirloom of this kind would be brought out and used were relatively few and far between, certainly not a common event, it speaks to the many decades that must have passed when this object resided in its original owners' line of inheritance from generation to generation. A treasured ceremonial object like this would have had a name, one most likely relating to the mythical origins of the imagery thereon and significant in the human history of the clan lineage. Unfortunately, such a name did not become a part of the recorded history of the club, nor the ceremonial name of its original owner. Many details of this kind that would have accompanied such treasured objects have been lost in the centuries since this heirloom was created.

The warm, rich color of the antler, the refinement of exceptional sculptural and two-dimensional forms softened by age, and the heft and balance of this club speak of its respected position and long history, and distinguish it as one of the finest clubs of its type to have survived.

Steven C. Brown

Additional View:

