

Clan Hat (War Helmet style)

Kaigani Haida; c. 1840-1860

Alder, paint

12" Long x 9 1/2" Wide x 10" High

War helmets were made as functional battle gear by Tlingit artists in the years before the early nineteenth century, when firearms came into common use. Haida traditions apparently did not include the use of functional battle helmets, as early examples from that area do not appear in Native use or museum collections. Many war helmets became the property of clan lineages upon the death of the warrior who upheld the clan's heritage. They have since been brought out during ceremonials as clan objects that call forward the ancestors to stand by in support of the living participants.

This headpiece is clearly made in emulation of the battle helmet type, though it is carved thinner and is more delicate of form than most original Tlingit examples. The style of sculpture suggests Kaigani Haida manufacture, particularly the shapes of the nose, eyes, and eyesockets. As relatively recent arrivals in the Prince of Wales Island area of Southeast Alaska (in approximately the early eighteenth century), the Kaigani would have had occasion to see the Tlingit helmets in action. The artist who carved this headpiece followed their general form. Unlike the carved wooden crest hats that emulate the forms of woven spruce root hats with their thin, flaring rims, this sculpture features a much abbreviated flare at its lower edge and a strongly thrusting sculptural form to the crest image that extends up and forward from the base. The result is a powerful sculpture and a dramatic headpiece, created to ceremonially display the inherited crest of a family and clan lineage.

This image most likely represents a sea bear, a frequently seen image from the Haida. The characteristics of the snout, the low ears, and the painted forms of pectoral fins and the whale-like tail combine to define the sea bear image. A small square mortise can be seen between the ears atop the head, which could have supported a dorsal fin, but it is not known exactly what form such an addition may have taken.

The ears, of which about three-quarters of the pair was missing, have been restored. The surviving lower half of one ear enabled the restorer to complete both forms, following the shapes of the traditional design formlines that embellish the surface.

Haida helmet-type headpieces are rare, and some of those in existence appear to have been made in the second half of the nineteenth century. This relatively early example exhibits a fine composition and workmanship, displaying both power and gracefulness in its sculpture and painted decoration.