



Portrait Mask-Dzila'qons (aka Jenna Cass)

Haida, c. 1820-1830

Hardwood, paint

9" Tall

Any study of the human-face sculptures known as portrait masks on the Northwest Coast inevitably leads to a small group of Haida carvings in a closely related style or image characterization, of which the subject mask is one. A few other masks of this type are also illustrated herein, of which the two earliest documented examples date from at least 1826 and 1827, the years they were catalogued into institutional collections in New England. The two may have been carved anywhere from two to five years earlier, given among other things the lengths of time it could take for a journey by sea from the Northwest Coast to the northeast coast of North America in that time, and the different hands they passed through prior to arriving at their current institutional locations.

Because the two masks (Related Objects A and B below) were acquired when they were fresh and new, with no adaptations for wearing the masks in ceremony, it has been proposed that they were made for sale rather than indigenous ceremonial use. This is of course possible; the fur trade had been going on for decades by this time. But it's also possible that the buyers of the two masks just happened to arrive at Kasaan village (where one of the two is recorded to have been collected) when these masks were recently completed and not yet prepared for ritual use. A presumption that goes along with the 'made for sale' label is that these were 'prototypes', the first in a long line of related masks that were also made for sale. However, further study of the group suggests that this does not appear to have been the case. Evidence present in the various related masks of this type that survive, including the subject mask, which number in the range of ten to twelve or more examples, suggests that the two with the earliest documentation are not necessarily the oldest masks of the group. Other masks of this representation,

identified by their sculptural similarity and related painting styles, appear to have been made by different artists and very possibly before the best-known two. Several of the group, as well as the subject mask, show clear signs of having been employed in traditional ceremony over a long span of time. Their approximate ages in these cases are suggested by the levels of wear and patination that have accumulated over their existence. One could say that they might date from the same c. 1825 timeframe or even later, and gathered their wear and dark color from indigenous usage in the ensuing decades prior to their acquisition by outsiders. Perhaps. But the tradition and image represented in these sculptures, that of the high-ranking noblewoman of the Haida Eagle moiety known as Dzila'qons, was apparently well established when the two well-documented masks were collected, and certainly some masks would have been made to commemorate and celebrate this legendary personage in a ritual setting before the creation of the well-known two. Unfamiliar with the Haida pronunciation of the name Dzila'qons, Euro-American traders uniformly referred to the personage of the mask as Jenna Cass, an anglicized name better suited to their linguistic habits and limitations.

The American ethnologist John R. Swanton (in *Contributions to the Ethnology of the Haida*, 1905) noted that 'Dzila'qons is a conspicuous and ever-recurring figure in their mythology'. He also stated that 'All the Eagles (persons of the Eagle moiety) upon this island came in succession out of the womb of Dzila'qons. In the process of descent they became differentiated [into the various family lines]'. An 1831 East India Marine Society catalog entry for the 1827 mask records that the mask is said to 'represent exactly the manner in which she painted her face'. The oral history thereby indicates that the stories and traditional representation of Dzila'qons existed in a deep timeframe established well before the early nineteenth-century creation of some of the existing examples. This also suggests that the identifying characteristics of the Dzila'qons image were codified before the 1826 and 1827 masks, and that some other ancient mask must have been the 'prototype', from which all the subsequent examples, including the New England two, were later developed.

The subject mask may be one of those carved before the two masks now in New England, and others exist that exhibit a good deal more dark patina than it and the other masks illustrated here. The subject mask is evidently the only one in which the irises of the eyes were completely cut through, presumably to enable the wearers of the mask to see through them well. In other examples, including the New England pair, the black circles of the irises are pierced by a small-diameter hole, enabling only limited visibility. Interestingly, the underside of the nose on the subject mask has also been carved through to create an opening, again the only one of the group to include this feature. Both characteristics suggest that the mask was made for indigenous cultural use and not merely for sale to an outsider.

The arched-oval shape of the mouth on the subject mask, and the appearance of the finely cut teeth and representation of a large labret, are characteristics featured in most of the other Dzila'qons masks regardless of different carvers having made them. This is not a common mouth form on Haida masks, and is one of the traditional indicators of the Dzila'qons representation, along with the setting of the eyes, the formation of the

nose and cheeks, and the design patterns painted on the surface, all of which were evidently based on the appearance of the original personage. The painted elements on each of the masks differ at least slightly, even when done by the same artist. One of the most common red elements, though not universally employed, is painted on one side of the nose or the other, often balanced on the opposite side by another red element of less defined shape. The common element is a broad red parallelogram that has one edge on or near the centerline of the nose, with the lower outside corner stretched out into a long, tapering point on the cheek. This must have been a signature element of Dzila'qons' face painting, as noted in the 1831 catalog entry, though its meaning is unknown today. This form of red element does not appear on the subject mask, but another large red form that drapes across the cheek takes its place on the mask's proper right side. It also appears on certain other examples, like related object C and others, in that case along with the common red parallelogram painted on the proper left side.

The same characteristics of painted features can be seen on two of the three or more existing carved figures representing Dzila'qons (Related objects G and H below). The heads of these figures are like miniature examples of the masks, with the added layer of information exhibited in the evident body language of each small image. Each of the two illustrated figures was carved by a different artist, revealed in the carving styles of the faces.

The most unusual features of the subject mask are the large naturalistic ears carved at the rear edge of the mask. Few Haida masks include such large natural-looking ears, though they are more common in Tlingit masks and major sculptures. The ears that appear on most Haida masks, if ears appear at all, tend to be smaller and often much more stylized, along the lines of the ears on related object C. Those rare naturalistic Haida mask ears are usually smaller and less prominent than the ears of the subject mask, as is seen in the works attributed to Simeon Stilthda. The subject mask also includes the subtle naturalistic feature of the filtrum on the upper lip. This shallow, parallel-sided groove, which becomes established during human fetus development, only rarely appears on Northwest Coast masks, and is not present on the two New England masks and their closest sculptural relatives. It is present on related object C and its counterpart in *Down From the Shimmering Sky*, Figure 42, (Related Object D) as well as a pair of early examples (collected by the Wilkes Expedition in 1841), which were both carved by the same artist (Related objects E and F below, and *Shimmering Sky*, Figures 33, 34).

These two masks, though not so noted in the book, feature several characteristics of the Dzila'qons tradition, including on one the signature red-painted elements across the nose and cheeks, though faded and worn. The mask with the red elements also includes an iron or copper-wire nose-ring and a small iron or copper 'training' labret of the type first used by young girls. The other mask exhibits different, and highly faded, red-painted elements on the cheeks and forehead, and a large labret of the type usual to the Dzila'qons image. The ears on both masks are of the stylized type also seen on related object C and its companion in *Shimmering Sky*, Fig. 42. The two Wilkes masks bring up the question of such masks being carved in pairs. Made by the same carver with the intent to appear alike except for the size of the labret, these may illustrate some aspect of the

Dzila'qons story that was enacted in ritual performances employing these masks. The masks exhibit a credible amount of wear and polish due to traditional use, indicating they were already somewhat old when collected by Wilkes in 1840 or 41, and again demonstrating that masks of this type were initially made to be worn in ceremonies.

It's possible then, that the subject mask has or had a counterpart somewhere, made by the same carver, with which its ceremonial existence was shared. Early collecting on the Northwest Coast was opportunistic and inconsistent, and it's not a surprise that if these types of masks once existed in deliberately made pairs, they have mostly been separated and were acquired for the most part individually. The subject mask is an early and outstanding example of this historical representation, one that was significant within the Haida culture in its day, and that continues to fascinate and intrigue those that encounter it.

Steven C. Brown

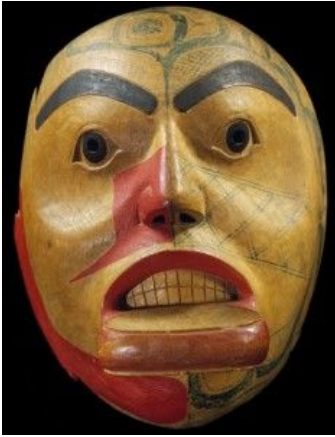
November, 2018

Alternate View

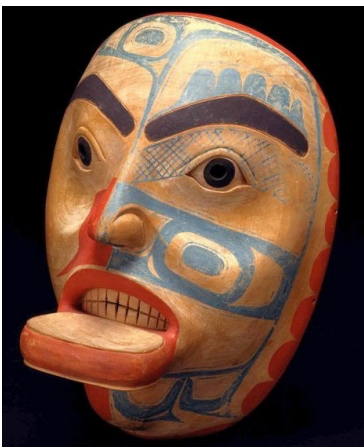


The three-quarter view emphasizes the powerfully consistent characteristics of the face sculpture in this group of masks overall and this example in particular. This is most likely based on the strong personality and powerful physical form of the original Dzila'qons, maintained by memory and tradition through a related series of carvers over time. The effect of the pierced iris in this view is particularly striking, a window into the soul of the image.

Related Objects:



A: Portrait mask of the high-ranking Haida noblewoman Dzila'qons, known among early fur traders in English as Jenna Cass. Catalogued in the American Antiquarian Society in November 1826, later transferred to the Peabody Museum, Harvard. One of the two earliest documented/collected examples of a portrait of this personage, along with related object B, both of which were carved by the same Alaskan Haida artist from Kasaan village, Prince of Wales Island, possibly at the same time, prior to 1826. Several of the masks of this type appear to have been made in pairs, or at least multiples of the same image by the same carver. This is an aspect of the characterization that has not yet been investigated. Peabody Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.



B: Haida Portrait mask of Dzila'qons, two views. Donated to the East India Marine Society of Salem in 1827, later the Peabody Essex Museum. This mask and the one above not only manifest the same historical entity, the carving and painting styles of the two masks indicate the hands of the same Kasaan carver. Differences exist primarily in the painted surface designs, which have been said (in an 1831 catalog entry) to represent face-painting patterns associated with the original Dzila'qons. This explains the degree of consistency seen in the painted designs on masks by different artists. The original ancestral personage of Dzila'qons may have pre-dated these mask representations by generations, with recurring iterations of the image made for a succession of proliferating families, some of which are the ones above, preserved and documented in museums.

Other examples, including the subject mask, following the same traditional parameters of representing this image, appear to be older than these two, which date to before 1826 and show no signs of use. Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Mass.



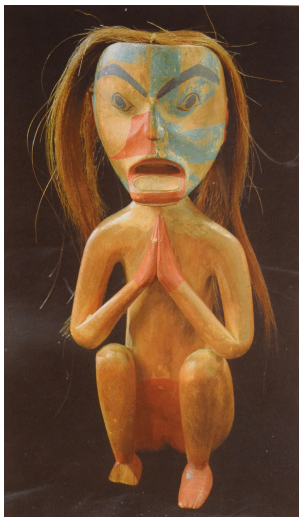
C, D: Haida Portrait masks of Dzila'qons. Representing the same entity as the masks above, these examples exhibit a related but stylistically different composition of painted design forms. The red element with the extended lower corner is painted on the proper left side of the face in C, the opposite of the two documented examples shown above. In example D the signature red element appears on the proper right side of the mask (unless the image has been reversed). The sculpture also differs in significant ways from those above in the shape of the mouths and labrets, the length/width proportions of the eyelid lines, and proportions of the face: From the peak to the brow, the brow to the tip of the nose, and the tip of the nose to the chin. The proportions in these masks and the previous two are markedly different, the result of the separate sculptural visions of two artists interpreting the same image, each in their own hand. Mask C has naturalistically proportioned humanoid ears formed in stylized symmetrical lobes. Example D is a more darkly oxidized and worn mask with the same ears by the same artist, which appears in *Down From the Shimmering Sky*, Page 68; Figure 42. [Mask D has the unusual, and probably not original, feature of a glass bead inlaid in the vision-hole of the proper right eye, which gives the mask an odd appearance]. Like these, the subject mask has many sculptural and design features that are superficially the same as the two documented portrait masks above. These and the subject mask, however, exhibit the styles of carving of two different men. Three individuals were thus responsible for the five masks illustrated above. Example C: Location unknown. Example D: University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Philadelphia.



E, F: Two masks collected by the Wilkes Expedition in or before 1841, which appear to have been carved by the same Haida artist, possibly as a pair illustrating different events in the life of Dzila'qons. Example E includes the signature red-painted elements of the Dzila'qons face-painting tradition and a tiny, iron or copper 'training' labret of the type first worn by young Haida girls. Example F exhibits differently shaped design elements in red on the cheeks and forehead, along with the large labret representation typical of the Dzila'qons tradition. The two masks beg the question of whether pairs of masks were commonly or sometimes made with the Dzila'qons representation, such as related objects A and B, and the possible pair illustrated as objects C and D. The appearance and condition of the two masks suggest that though they were collected later, they may in fact be older than the two masks now in New England, objects A and B, and represent a different artist's take on the story of Dzila'qons. National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian, Washington DC.



G: Dzila'qons figure, two views. To the strong sculptural characteristics of the face, the carver of this stunning figure added another dimension to the image with the expression of her body language. Her breasts seem to indicate she was the mother of many children. Dzila'qons was said to be the matriarch of entire clans of the Haida Eagle moiety. This figure and the one below both have broken right feet. Is this a coincidence, or is it a traditional part of the image? Private collection.



H: Sitting on her heels, this figure provides us with yet a different perspective on the legendary Dzila'qons. The resemblance of the hand position to the making of Christian prayer may be coincidental, and drawn from an indigenous Haida tradition. (Protestant missionaries didn't arrive on Haida Gwaii until the 1870s.) The proper left side of the face, opposite the signature red parallelogram, and parts of the forehead are painted with large areas of blue-green, the color often associated with the initiated class of the nobility,

and seen much more often in Tlingit art than among the Haida. Though very close in style to the series of masks now in New England, of which this figure is a companion in the Peabody Museum, it was carved by a different artist than the previous, figure G, or any of the masks illustrated above. Of note are the eyes, which are set more closely together and with greater outward and down-cast angles than those in the previous figure. In general, this rendering of the chieftess' face is beautifully made and illustrative of the traditional figure. The previous sculpture, though, more completely captures the essence of strength and power that is central to the Dzila'qons image in its subtly detailed sculpture. Peabody Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge.