



### Oystercatcher Rattle

Tlingit, Attributed to Kadjisdu.axch, Old Wrangell, c. 1770-1790

Hardwood, paint, fiber

12" Long

Many nineteenth-century Northwest Coast artists' names have been recorded over the last century and a half, but a scant few names from the eighteenth century were ever recorded in the literature or oral histories. Among the Tlingit of that time, one artist earned a reputation as 'The greatest carver of wood in the history of the Tlingit people', so described in a written narrative of his work on the Klukwan Whale House transcribed by Tlingit scholar Louis Shotridge c. 1917. It is this man to whom the creation of this outstanding shaman's rattle is attributed.

Along with the unofficial title, his name, Kadjisdu.axch II, and his clan, the Shtuk-heen Kiks'adi of Kaasitlaan, the Old Wrangell village, were given to Shotridge by Yeil-xaak, clan historian of the Klukwan Whale House at that time. Of the three surviving sources recording his name (in themselves a measure of his historical importance), the narrative that Shotridge collected on behalf of the University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, is by far the richest and most informative. Louis was trained as an ethnologist and linguist at the University Museum. He served as an assistant curator and educator there for many years in the early twentieth century along with his Tlingit wife Florence, who among her many skills was a weaver of Chilkat blankets.

Kadjisdu.axch's reputation as the greatest Tlingit carver of wood must have been established in part by this truly outstanding oystercatcher rattle, only recently come to light from obscurity. The images and types of activity depicted in this remarkable sculpture are unlike any other rattle of its type; a unique vision composed on the back of an elegantly poised oystercatcher with an ivory beak. Oystercatchers are a black coastal

shorebird, the spirit and image of which were adopted as allies by Tlingit shamans, who employed these rattles in their spiritual work of healing and divination.

Stylistically, this rattle has several features in common with early works attributed to Kadjisdu.axch, such as the set of four houseposts he carved for the Nanya.aayi clan leader who became known as Chief Shakes of Wrangell, now displayed in the Wrangell Museum. These can be dated to c. 1770-1780, based on a comparison of decay progression in early totem poles he carved with related nineteenth-century examples of known antiquity. The rattle contains several stylistic features that relate directly to the work exhibited in these four houseposts, and was most likely made near the time in which they were created. Northwest Coast artists did not sign or mark their work in any way except in the personal style with which they interpreted the carving tradition inherited from their predecessors.

Most rattles of this type exhibit essentially symmetrical arrangements of the figures carried on the bird's back. One of the most striking features of this rattle is the near-total asymmetry of the carved imagery, which is way out of the box compared to most rattles of this type, including more than one example attributed to this artist [see Fig 1a,b]. The primary figure in the subject rattle appears to be a bear, represented by a large head facing the typically short, stout handle of the rattle, its feet carved at the four corners of the composition. The bear is carved with a humanoid nose and mouth, indicating shamanic transformation between human and animal forms. Atop the bear's head is an exquisitely carved eagle with its small feet curled over the bear's ears. The bird's tail feathers lie flat behind its head on the bear's back. The sculpture of this eagle is closely related to similar ones appearing on one of the Shakes houseposts, representing the inner spirits of two octopi [see Fig. 2]. The forms of the eagle's and bear's feet are the same as the style of feet that he employed on the Shakes posts, Whale House posts, and other major sculptures [See Fig. 3a,b]. The bear's head includes a finely carved ridge that curves around each side from below the eyebrows to delineate the cheek area, terminating below the mouth. This formline-like feature can be seen on several figures on the Shakes houseposts and many other prominent objects attributed to his hands, and is not widely seen in the work of other historical Tlingit artists of his time [see Fig. 4a,b,c].

The most unusual feature of the bear is the group of three subsidiary figures arrayed on one side, two small humans and one bear cub, that are depicted as if suckling at the teats of the bear. This may be a reference to the origin story of the woman who married a bear and gave birth to bear-human offspring, though this does not seem to be commonly depicted in other objects made to serve the shamanic tradition. On the other side of the bear, what appears to be an otter or a wolf is shown biting the head of a large salmon that curves back from the right side of the bear's mouth. Body and tail proportions of this figure are closer to those of a wolf, though otters are commonly seen in shamanic material. The same signature uses of design elements that make up this salmon's head and body are employed on two of the relief-carved salmon on one of the Mudshark posts in the Chief Shakes House [see Fig 5a, b].

The end of the wolf's tail is draped along the centerline of a third human head, of unknown identity, positioned near the rear of the bear's body. It's probable that the bear,

eagle, wolf, humans and bear cub are all representations of spirit beings that were helpers to the shaman, drawn from specific visions experienced by him in trance states that were communicated to the carver for him to manifest in wood. The wolf is taut and animated, and nothing is static about its lively stance in a shallow crouch. Except for its feet, it is nearly carved separate from the body of the rattle, its delicate tail spanning a gap between the wolf's rear and the humanoid head on which it rests.

On the front of the bird, a crisply carved formline face with a protruding recurved beak fills the breast, with simple formline wing designs on each side of the rattle. The wings are composed with certain two-dimensional design elements that are often seen in other sculptures attributed to Kadjisdu.axch, and are one of the strongest indications that he was the creator of this rattle. The oystercatcher's legs and feet are drawn up close to its body, a typical arrangement among many rattles of this kind, as is the round opening of the bird's anus between them. The oystercatcher's left foot is a replacement, evidently the only recent repair made to this rattle in otherwise excellent condition.

Generations of handling have polished the recurved beak on the breast and the tiny eagle, as well as the snout of the bear and other prominent surfaces. The fact that this delicately crafted object has survived nearly intact for over 225 years is remarkable, and perhaps partly due to the high degree of respect it once must have enjoyed during its traditional life among generations of the Tlingit. Along with other acclaimed objects carved by this celebrated artist, including several clan hats, more than one or two other oystercatcher rattles, a delicate bear mask (recently sold at auction), at least three bent-corner sculpted bowls, and another set of four houseposts, this outstanding example of his work aids in cementing his longstanding reputation as the greatest carver of wood among the Tlingit people.

Steven C. Brown  
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**Related Objects:**



**1, a:** Oystercatcher rattle attributed to Kadjisdu.axch', based on stylistic similarities with known works by this artist. The symmetrical composition of the figures on the oystercatcher's back is the more common arrangement in rattles of this kind. This example is in the collection of the British Museum.

**1, b:** Certain characteristics of this symmetrical figure group suggest the stylistic hand of Kadjisdu.axch', such as the eyesocket and nostril area of the long-tongued figure facing the handle, and the exquisite detail of the three subsidiary figures, which depict a shaman extracting a confession from a witch. Location?



**2 a,b:** Octopus with eagle-like inner head (or beak) appearing on one of the Shakes housepost replications, with four legs lined with suckers dangling below it. The small eagle head on the rattle reflects a similarity of composition and proportion.



**3 a:** One of the four replicated Chief Shakes houseposts in Xat'gu Hit', Mudshark House, carved in 1985 and re-installed in the newly reconstructed house in 2013. Note the same way of carving the hands and feet of these figures as those on the subject rattle.

**b:** A shaman's grave guardian figure from Dry Bay, Alaska, American Museum of Natural History, New York. Note the similar sculpture of the hands, feet, and the precision and lifelike forms of the four land otters that encircle the figure's body, comparable to the small wolf image on one side of the rattle.



**4 a:** Raven At The Head Of The Nass headpiece, part of the Seattle Art Museum collection. The eyebrow bends over the eyesocket and flattens out into a relief-carved formline that defines the cheek and lower mandible. The figures in the crest feathers/ears are comparable to related works by this artist, such as the Shakes Whale Hat, now in the Burke Museum, Seattle. **4 b:** The story of Crane and the Man that flew on its back, formerly in the National Museum of the American Indian, is rendered in the same style as 3a, with the same eyebrow-to-jaw formline in relation to the beak. The Man's hands extend through the tall ears, or perhaps wings, of the crane.



**4 c:** A shaman's bear mask recently auctioned exhibits the same type of carved formline-like element flowing down from the eyebrows to the lower jaw line as seen on the subject rattle. The precise detail of the nose, eyes, and faces in the ears also exhibit the style of this exceptional artist.



**5 a,b:** The salmon from the rattle and one from a Shakes housepost show use of the same twin U-shapes in the body above the pectoral fin and a related composition in the two salmon heads.