



Horn Bowl

Tlingit or Haida, c. 1800 to 1830

Mountain sheep horn

9 inches long

Spoons, ladles, and particularly bowls made from mountain sheep horn represent some of the most advanced technologies using natural materials that are known from the Northwest Coast. Made to be functional and beautiful, these ladles and bowls are for personal use and consumption of fish or seal oil, boiled fish or meat, created to be held comfortably in hand or lap.

Converting an extremely rough spiral horn of irregular thickness into a bilaterally symmetrical vessel is no simple task, but one at which Northwest Coast artists, including the maker of this example, excelled. The horn must be carved down to an even thickness by boiling to soften and open it up, shaping the ends of the bowl into one of several traditional types. This vessel represents an earlier type than others. Opening the inside of the horn's curl gives access to the interior of the horn, where the material is smooth and almost plastic-like in the way it responds to hand tools. As the rough outside of the horn is carved away and thinned down, the form of the bowl takes shape. The last boiling opens the bowl much wider than the dimensions of the original horn, the ends rising higher and closer together than in the horn's original curl. Final details of the pattern of grooves on the inside prepare the bowl for its exterior decoration.

The even thinness and symmetry of this bowl are remarkable, and not easy characteristics to attain. Pale when first carved, sheep horn slowly acquires a darker color through use and oxidation. The deep, rich patina on this bowl, however, is of a level that few have acquired, indicating exceptional age. The form of this bowl is an early northern type that echoes bowls made by interior Athabaskans, which were decorated with circle dots and other geometrical forms. Later bowl shapes came along and became the new norm in subsequent decades of the nineteenth century. This bowl was once somewhat wider, with the sides dipping down and bowing out farther instead of rising slightly in the middle. The bowl was carved with a nearly flat bottom for secure functionality.

The formlines that make up the faces on each end of the bowl are composed in an early style, made up of formlines and negative spaces proportioned in the manner of

historical works from the pre-1840 period, going back as far as the first decades of the nineteenth century. The gracefully composed designs define a traditional form that is difficult if not impossible to identify as any specific creature, other than some sort of pointed-beak bird. Raven is of course a possibility, but not the only one. The formlines, though broad, nonetheless exhibit a smooth fluidity, much less blocky than those seen in some other early bowls of this type (see examples below). The formline compositions are related to the kinds of designs that appear on bent-corner boxes and chests, bent-corner bowls and carved bowls in wood (see examples below), which are somewhat generic in imagery, rather than representing the characteristics of specific crest images. This may be the case so that vessels and containers of these kinds can be traded or gifted across clan and tribal lines without violating traditions of crest ownership.

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Additional views:



The top and bottom views illustrate the interior and exterior refinement of rim-parallel grooving and the oval, flattened bottom area.



The centered formline complex on each side of the bowl serves as a transition between the formline faces in deeper relief that fill each high-rising end of the vessel. The formlines are broad but fluid, not as blocky as common formlines in the eighteenth century. The refined thinness of the bowl's sides can be seen in each of these photos, as can the dark lines crossing the patina of the interior view, which delineate the annual growth rings of the original horn.



Views of the end designs illustrate the early, broad-formline characteristics of the primary formline pattern. The pointed 'beak' in the center bottom indicates a bird, though what kind is open to all the many possible birds that exist in the historic tradition, from raven to kingfisher. The single slit across the eye ovoids is one of the earliest relief forms for ovoids in the design system.



The detail of one of the high ends exhibits the fine incising and precise relief that characterizes the exterior decoration on this bowl. Broad formlines and narrow reliefs indicate an early style of composition.

Related objects:



A: This bowl, with less well-defined ends, represents the same early style of vessel, in this case embellished with a shallow sculptural figure. Crisp hollowing parallels the circumference of the rim.

Haida, collected by Jacobsen, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, #IV A 1101 (digital archives, unpublished).



B: This bowl with similar upswept ends also exemplifies the early vessel form with high, rounded ends. It appears that at least one end has been trimmed down, perhaps due to damage, as indicated by the incomplete formline elements that run off the top edge.

Ex. Charles and Valerie Diker Collection, New York, NY, Ex. Donald Ellis Gallery, New York, NY - See: Donald Ellis Gallery, 2007, Toronto, pg. 47



C: An example with very tall ends in the style of the subject vessel. The sides have been spread out and have lowered down into a continual gunwale-like curve. The formline embellishment includes recurved beaks like those of a thunderbird, which have been carved from the horn's original thickness.

Haida, collected by Jacobsen, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, # IV A 1098 (digital archives, unpublished).



D: This later style of horn bowl shape dates from about 1840-1860, and exhibits a combination of sculptural and two-dimensional embellishments. The formline pattern exhibits thinner primary lines and broader negative areas, characteristics of formline development beyond the early nineteenth-century style. The much lighter color of the horn indicates a shorter period of time since it was created, as compared with the deep, dark patina of the subject and other examples.

Thomas Burke Memorial Museum, Seattle, WA, Cat. No. 1-3003 – See: Holm, Bill. Spirit and Ancestor: A Century of Northwest Coast Indian Art at the Burke Museum. Seattle: Burke Museum, 1987, pg. 152, pl. 60



E: Here a small wooden bowl exhibits a similar vessel form, differing from the horn examples above in the width and length of the bottom flat and the thickness of the material. The interior hollows and ridges are of the same pattern as the horn examples shown above, and the formline embellishment shares many general characteristics with the subject bowl, including the thin crescent relief in the eye ovoids. Here the originally light-colored wood had darkened considerably, evidence of a long history of traditional use.

Haida, collected by Jacobsen, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, # IV A 849 (digital archives, unpublished).