



Grease Bowl, Baby bird

Coast Tsimshian or Haisla/Heiltsuk, c. 1800-1830

Wood, traces of red pigment

9.5" Long

Provenance: Collected in Southeast Alaska before 1882, by C.E.S. Wood, remaining in the family by descent.

Some of the things that distinguish Northwest Coast artists from one another are their many varied interpretations of sculptural vessels that depict transformation between animal forms and traditional bowl shapes from different regions. This unusual vessel transforms a traditional northern bowl type with a wide flat rim surrounding an inner bowl cavity into the open-mouthed, assertive form of an energetic baby bird. The bowl's contents can be poured out from the mouth of the bird as from a pitcher, which could suggest a parent bird is represented, but the over-sized proportion of the bird's head, its plump round body and the comparatively small tail seem to indicate a baby bird's developing anatomy.

In addition to the generally northern style of the internal bowl form, the definition of the bird's head, beak and eyesockets displays a northern-style sculptural sensibility coupled with the exuberance and singularity common to many southern-coast vessels. The compact set of three V-cut crescent shapes and a small trigon behind the hinge of the beak on each side relate more closely to southern sculptural traditions than classic northern ones, suggesting an artist working at the cusp between two influential design perspectives. The sculptural adaptation of the open beak and throat bored through to the bowl interior have been masterfully handled, as sure and natural as the gullet of an avian baby. The wings of the bird are integrated with the sides of the bowl, extending just past the rear of the bowl below the base of the tail. The wide rim of the bowl sweeps powerfully forward and up to become the strongly arched brow of the head.

The bowl's collector, C.E.S. Wood, traveled through Southeast Alaska in the late 1870s, where he is likely to have purchased or traded for the bowl. An article he later wrote on his travels was published in *The Century Magazine*, vol. XXIV, July 1882, No.3, which included among many illustrations a drawing of this bowl. It is there noted as a 'Bowl, Raven Totem, Alaska' and 'Domestic bowl for seal oil, Hoonah Kwahn'. He makes mention of Hoonah village and people from there in the text, but nothing is there in reference to the bowl or its acquisition. No additional notation appears in the text that would further identify where and

how Wood came to have the bowl. The Century Magazine article nonetheless documents the bowl to at least 1882, and it is said to have remained in family hands until the present time.

The sculptural face in the bird's tail has more characteristics in common with northern British Columbia coast styles such as the lower Skeena River or Coast Tsimshian or Haisla First Nations than it does with classic Tlingit style such as from Hoonah. The narrow, slim lips and broad arched nostrils, prominent cheekbones and bulged eyes are composed in the image of totem pole and mask faces from these other areas. Beyond its physical position, there are no indications of individual tail feathers outside the ovoid-shaped face to support its role as the bird's tail. Perhaps this was to emphasize the human influence in the transformation from creature to bowl.

Between the bird's neck and the tips of its wings the outer surfaces are covered with formline-like two-dimensional compositions representing shoulder joints and layered feather groups. These surface designs, however, differ from classic northern formline structures in subtle but significant ways, similar to what is frequently seen in late nineteenth-century carved and painted objects. But the apparently greater age of this bowl is boldly stated by the deeply blackened and polished surface that is known to result from lifetimes of common use in a smoky house. Bowls like this were made to contain and serve seal or fish oil, such as the eulachon, traditional accompaniments to dried fish, meats and steamed roots in this region. A surface like this doesn't usually develop in a few years or even a few decades. The wood from which a bowl like this would have been carved was light in color, being most likely alder, cottonwood, or spruce, though the slightly darker yew was sometimes used for bowls of this kind as well. The oil that absorbs so completely into the wood oxidizes over time and handling in an open-fire household, which steadily darkens the wood. Knowing its origin from lighter-colored source wood helps to illustrate the generations of use that would have been required in creating the surface tone and polish of a bowl such as this.

Because its appearance basically hasn't changed since its acquisition by Wood before 1882, the bowl was most likely in service at least before about 1830, at which point it would have been fifty years old, and it has all the appearance of being significantly older than that, perhaps as far back as around 1800. Important objects like this bowl are known to have been traded among coastal First Nations far from their origins. Based on sculptural and design styles, it seems uncertain that this bowl would have come about in this form via Hoonah village c. 1800. The non-traditional formline designs might then be attributed to a north-central coast artist, perhaps Haisla or Heiltsuk, at a time prior to the full adoption and refinement of the formline tradition in that area, which was descending from the north during that period and had become firmly established among the Haisla and Heiltsuk by about 1840 and beyond.

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Additional Views:



The dramatic sweep of the wide bowl rim up and over the bird's brow shows to best advantage in this view.



On the sides of the bowl are the wings, which are embellished with relief-carved design forms composed in a non-traditional variant of northern coast formline design styles. A cross-hatched texture has been applied to certain design forms, which also appears on the Related Object illustrated below.



In this view, the layered sets of wing feathers flow back from a large ovoid shape representing the shoulder or wing joint.



The face in the tail is carved with characteristics often seen in Coast Tsimshian and possibly Haisla totem pole and mask faces.



Looking from the rear over the tail face, the opening that forms a pouring spout through the open beak is clearly seen.