

Wooden Tricksters

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In the world of museum collections there are superstar and underdog heritage items. Sometimes the stars shine due to their aesthetic qualities, but other times they become stars due to a famous scholar's study of them. In anthropology, whole classes of items can become superstars. For instance, every self-respecting natural science museum must have one or two full sized and famously carved totem poles. But in the less than famous world of university museums, we frequently find an abundance of underdogs. These include less than brilliant examples of well-known genres and less than well-known genres, and sometimes outright unknown genres. These underdogs are my favorites for teaching anthropological approaches to non-Western arts. Of course, everything unfamiliar starts out as unknown, but some things resist identification and interpretation even through years of study.



Figure 1: SIUE University Museum 2006.19.2601

Voices in Wood is a teaching and research project that began with a Northwest Coast wooden bowl that a student selected to conduct research on for one of my classes in Spring 2016. The project grew the following year when two undergraduate students chose to do an exhibit of Northwest coast carvings. Working with about thirty items, the students and I began assembling comparative collections consisting of examples of like items from other museum collections. However, a few of the items stubbornly refused to conform to any recognizable genre. One of these was an unassuming grey-blue mask with a long pointy beak or nose and pronounced “ears” atop its head. Besides not being able to determine its provenience (i.e. when, where and who), we were stumped on the basic question of what sort of animal, bird or creature it was supposed to be. It is also uncommon for a Northwest Coast carving to be painted all one color, and a dull one at that (Figure 1).

Provisionally, a colleague invited a Coast Salish master carver to visit campus. Although the artist was hesitant to assign the provenience, he was quick to identify the subject. Following the lower edge of the beak with his hand, he told us that it has “the throat of a raven.” Putting it up to his face and peering through the eye holes, he declared, “This is a beautiful usable dance mask.” He then demonstrated how a dancer would pull a little string to make the beak move while he was dancing. Although very persuasive, this came as a complete surprise because this raven was nothing like the star quality raven masks of the *hamatsa* ceremony made famous by Edward Curtis and others. Incidentally, we also have one of the *hamatsa*-style raven masks that doesn’t quite fit with those found in other museum collections (Figure 2).

The following year we had another Coast Salish artist visit. By this time, I had really become enamored with *Voices in Wood*, and began plans to put the items, now up to sixty-nine, into an online database. But student researchers were encountering more items for which no comparable examples could be found, and the two artists’ opinions did not always align. These red flags signaled that perhaps there was something wrong with the items in our collection. I wanted to get to the bottom of this mystery, so I assigned *Voices in Wood* research in my museum course in Spring 2019. A graduate student took up the case of the troublesome bird masks. Her pursuit of birds with “ears” paid off when she found one highly provenanced piece with a striking likeness to our blue-grey raven. It has bonified paperwork tracing it back to 1904 when a Smithsonian ethnographer acquired it from the Tlingit. I considered the case closed.

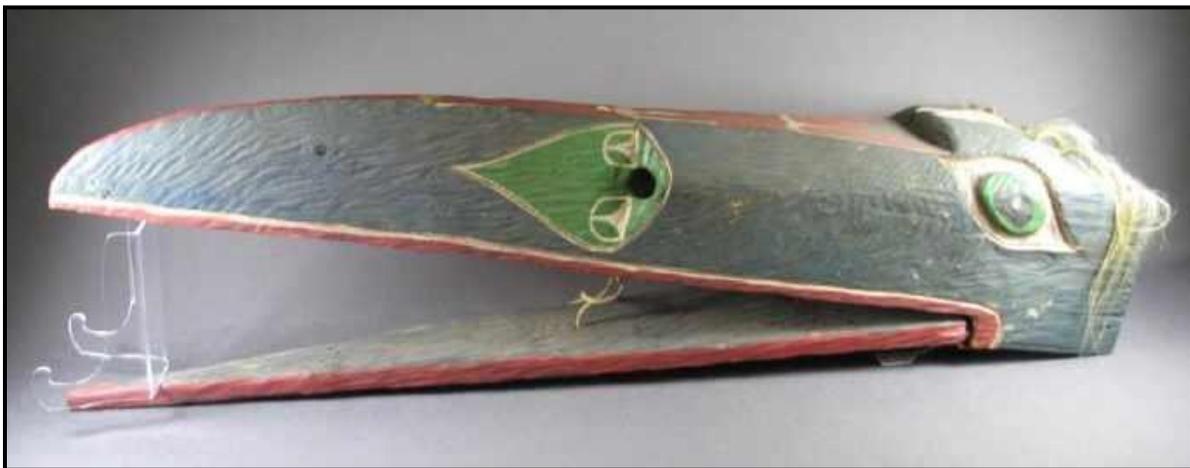


Figure 2: SIUE University Museum 2006.19.2617

Due to issues with other items, however, I decided to call in a curatorial expert. Looking at the blue-grey raven, the curator’s first proclamation was, “It looks like tropical wood.” Tropical wood doesn’t grow on the Northwest coast so it is diagnostic of fakes made for sale by non-indigenous peoples. The curator also suggested that it had “kind of a mish mash of attributes,” not at all like anything one would find on the coast. We had confounded our conundrum. If it could be identified as tropical wood, we might conclude that an artist in the tropics had modeled it after the Smithsonian one. But the type of wood is not easy to tell. Is it time for a wood expert? Will we ever be able to know conclusively the origin and meaning of this item? Maybe not, because the exploration has raised deeper questions. Whose expertise is most valued? It is an ethical dilemma to favor either the Salish artists or the scholars.

Perhaps the biggest lesson here is one the Raven trickster would approve. We should get comfortable with the unknowable and seek out the value in all sides of differing opinions.

Primary Artifact Analysis Exercise

In this exercise you will learn to perform a systematic inquiry aimed at extracting and documenting the information that can be acquired from the physical properties of things. Select a physical object to study that you have close at hand. The object can be something very ordinary or extraordinary, but it should have physical characteristics that are interesting to you. Examine the item VERY carefully. Jot down your findings for each of the following:

A) Sensory characteristics: Describe the colors, lines, shapes, textures, smells, sounds, movements, weight, size, etc. of the item.

B) Materials used: Provide as specific names as possible for the types of materials; Are they natural, modified or chemically engineered? Give rationale.

C) Construction techniques: Is it hand or machine made (or both)? What types of tools were used to produce it? Were the social relations of production domestic, workshop, industrial, or other? Describe and give rationale.

D) Style: (if applicable)

i) representational: Select one of the following categories (if applicable) and describe its application: realistic (looks just like what it is supposed to represent), stylized/conventional (common established genre within a culture) or abstracted (individualized and idiosyncratic artistic rendering).

ii) non-representational: Select all of the following categories that are employed and describe their application: geometric; symmetrical or asymmetrical; angular or curvilinear; singular or repetitive motif(s)

E) Labels, name tags, logos, or other textual aspects.

F) Condition: evidence of use, alteration or mending?

Summary Identification:

What is the item called?

What is the time period of the item?

What cultural or social groups would use this item?