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May Artifact of the Month: Contemporary Human Bear Helmet



SITKA – The Sheldon Jackson Museum Artifact of the Month for May is a contemporary human bear helmet made by Tlingit artist Tommy Joseph. The helmet is hand carved from alder in the form of a human bear and has opercula for teeth and black and red paint. The museum purchased this helmet along with three other works of Joseph with funding from the Rasmuson Foundation in the fall of 2013. Though not a replica of any particular helmet, this contemporary piece was inspired by Tlingit artifacts Joseph saw as he travelled as a Smithsonian Visual Artist and USA Fellow intensely researching Tlingit armor at museums around the world. The contemporary helmet, like many Tlingit pieces of armor dating back to the 19th century, is exemplary of expert construction and artistry.

Tommy Joseph is a well-known award winning Tlingit wood carver. Joseph has thoroughly researched Tlingit armor, tobacco pipes, and Northwest Coast weaponry in museum collections around the world, taught various University of Alaska Southeast classes, and contributed immensely to the community of Sitka, where he has resided for over twenty years and owns and operates the Sitka Rain Dance Gallery. He carves everything from masks, totem poles, bowls, and halibut hooks to a variety of wooden armor components, including helmets, collars, slat armor, and wooden-handled daggers. While Tommy initially examines Northwest Coast artifacts for ideas, he formulates his own images of what he wishes to carve and then adds his own personal stylistic elements to his work.

Joseph's solo show, *Rainforest Warriors*, which opened in the spring of 2013 at the Alaska State Museum, was his first major show to exhibit a series of armor, helmets, moccasins, and daggers that he worked on for nearly ten years. Of the six full sets of life-size armor exhibited in the show, the Sheldon Jackson Museum purchased three pieces – the *Human Bear Helmet*, shown here, and the *Chinese Coin and Buffalo Hide Tunic*, and *Knee High Moccasins*. Prior to this purchase, the museum had no sets of

armor made by contemporary Alaska Native artists, no Chinese coin armor, no simple knee-high moccasins without beading. Joseph's artistry, his connection to Sitka and the community, and the ability of these pieces to fill gaps in the collection made them highly desirable for the Sheldon Jackson Museum. The Friends of the Sheldon Jackson Museum hosted a special event in late April of 2014 to celebrate the museum's collecting of contemporary Alaska Native art, including these works, with Rasmuson Foundation funds awarded to museum in October of 2013.

Helmets, face shields, and well-fitted body armor made of leather and wood were used to protect the warrior's vital organs from traditional weaponry. The layers of leather and wood, worn together or separately and individually fit to the fighter, safeguarded the torso and extremities from daggers, the commonest weapon possessed by every Tlingit man, bows and arrows, clubs, war picks, and spears during battle. Body armor was common among many North American Natives, but the use of wooden helmets and face shields, also sometimes referred to as collars, was unique to northern Northwest Coast tribes.

For body armor, *ne-art* or *khe-ka*, sleeveless tunics were made of hide. Tlingit used the thickest available hides including walrus, sea lion, and moose and the thickest part of the skin from along the backbone of the animal.¹ Skins for tunics were prepared and layered to allow for up to a half an inch thickness, making the leather so hard and stiff it sometimes had to be soaked in water to increase pliability before one could put it on. The tunic featured a hole for the head and each arm, a closed left side, and an open right side fastened together with tie strings, loops, or slit bands and toggles. The front of the armor curved down below the stomach and was open at the bottom to allow legs freedom of movement. Although protective, the use of armor was situational because it restricted vision, impeded movement, and could decrease one's speed. Only those with special training, sufficient strength, and agility to move while wearing armor wore it and if the ability to move stealthily and quickly was a priority, only a helmet might be worn.

Worn with hide armor were two kinds of wooden armor, a jacket-like cuirass, *wonda*, and a broad rectangle of narrow rods, *sinkate*, translated as "waist-apron." For the *wonda*, slats or slats and rods were made of hardwood and drawn together with twined sinew, forming a front and back fastened together with ties. The back was generally cut straight but the front extended in a V-shape to protect the stomach and genitals. Hide bands or straps attached to the each top side secured the armor over the shoulders. The *sinkate* was comprised of a small wooden rods laced together with horizontal bands of sinew thread or twisted mountain goat wool cord.

Much armor is undecorated, but some is painted with images of crests or spirits and some of the earliest armor has strips of geometric quillwork on the front, either horizontally or in the form of a V, fringed along the bottom. Later armor designs made after European contact were occasionally influenced by Euro-American naval jackets and cloth vests with Chinese coins used in place of mother of pearl buttons.

Of all the warrior's accoutrements, the war helmet is the most striking and perhaps more than any other kind of armor, the most psychologically jarring when encountered by an enemy combatant. Generally massive and carved from a single piece of hardwood, sometimes a burl or tree root for the best protection, helmets are designed to cover the entire head to just above the eyes and carved with humanoid forms or animals or beings with attributes of both. The variety of animals they feature is tremendous. Clan crests such as bear, orca, sea lion, raven and eagle are the most common but shark,

merganser, frog and marten are also sometimes represented. If an animal visage is carved, its most terrifying features are emphasized to instill fear – large, mouths of gaping opercula teeth, eyes flashing with inlay of shining copper or abalone. Instead of aggression some designs feature an animal face with an eerie air of calm and an indifference that would be horrific in the carnage of a battlefield. Humanoid faces on helmets may depict an ancestor or a spirit helper in the form of a human or may have painting ceremonial crest designs painted on clan members' faces. Some helmets were embellished with feathers, fur or human hair.

Almost all surviving examples were collected in Tlingit territories though there are oral histories of Haida, Tsimshian, and southern tribes that mention the use of armor. Styles of existing armor date to before 1850 though oral histories date warfare back to time immemorial and archaeological evidence dates warfare in the Northwest Coast back at least three millennia. Much of what we know about the function and meaning of surviving Tlingit armor has largely been gleaned from Native Alaskan oral histories, and 18th and 19th century Euro-American journals and drawings. By the mid-1800s as warfare was increasingly discouraged and as weaponry became increasingly more powerful and the number of firearms available increased, the use of armor in battle was on the decline. Long after armor became obsolete, it was kept as at.óow – clan-owned crest objects, and worn and displayed at koo.eex' or memorial feasts and other ceremonies.

The Sheldon Jackson Museum invites you to see the human bear helmet made by Tommy Joseph during the month of May. This contemporary work of art will be on exhibit until May 31st.

Summer hours are 9a.m. to 5p.m. daily. General admission is \$5 for adults; \$4 for seniors; and visitors 18 years of age and younger, Friends of the Sheldon Jackson Museum and those with passes are admitted free of charge.

Dauenhauer, Nora Marks, Richard Dauenhauer, and Lydia T. Black. *Anooshi Lingit Aani Ka/Russians in Tlingit America: The Battles of Sitka, 1802 and 1804*. Seattle: University of Washington Press. 2008

Emmons, George Thornton & (Ed.) De Laguna, Frederica. *The Tlingit Indians*. Seattle: University of Washington Press. 1991

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Jacqueline Fernandez

Phone (907) 747-8981 Fax (907) 747-3004

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ⁱ Imported hides, especially elk, probably because of its lighter weight, effectiveness, were also highly valued and a staple trade item for 18th Yankee captains travelling up and down the coast and from the Columbian River to Alaska. 18th century Euro-American traders frequently mention armor made of elk skin purchased from Chinookans of the lower Columbia River. Armor skins from elk called clemmons were traded down the coast to the mouth of the river and were trade items for Yankee captains who traded them with Tlingit as well as Haida and the Nootka.