HUMAN HAIR AS A DECORATIVE FEATURE IN TLINGIT CEREMONIAL PARAPHERNALIA

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The incentive for writing a paper on the use of human hair as a decorative feature in Tlingit ceremonial paraphernalia is due to the presence of thirty-three objects so embellished in the Alaska Historical Museum collections and, secondly, from the discovery that they are all of Tlingit origin. This, in itself, would not be unusual since the museum possesses considerably more Tlingit material than Tsimshian or Haida and contains nothing of the Kwakiutl or Nootka . However, examination of the plates and figures in a number of studies dealing with Northwest Coast decorative art reveals additional evidence that such a use of human hair on the Northwest Coast is a Tlingit trait, almost exclusively.

Davis (1949) figures thirteen objects decorated with hair, presumably human. Of these, ten are Tlingit, two are Kaigani Haida, and one is labeled simply Haida. The Kaigani are known to have adopted many Tlingit traits.

Niblack (1888) figures nine objects decorated with hair, six of which are Tlingit, three being Haida.

Inverarity (1950) figures seventeen hair-decorated objects, six of which are Tlingit, one listed as probably Tlingit, seven are unknown, one is Nootka and two are Haida. Of the unknown, three, having been collected by Emmons are likely Tlingit, being of the typical Tlingit killer-whale motif.

Several other authors writing on Northwest Coast decorative art have figured hair-decorated objects but none have given this style of decoration more than casual mention, if it was mentioned at all.

In decorating wooden objects with hair the usual procedure was to drill rows of small holes at uniform distances varying from one quarter inch to two inches or more apart depending on the size of the object being decorated. The tuft of hair to be inserted was then bent in the middle across the end of a short wooden peg which, when driven flush, held the tuft upright securely. When thus properly set, all were clipped to a uniform length. These clipped tufts appear so coarse and bristly they have sometimes been described as "horse tail." In fact, two of the hair-decorated objects in the Alaska Historical Museum, a baton in the form of a Winchester rifle and a very large rattle, are actually decorated with horse tail hair.

In decorating ceremonial batons in the typical killer whale fin and paddle designs, the hair embellishment appears only on the back edge. In this instance the hair is not clipped but drapes gracefully, the locks being six inches or more in length.

A few specimens examined revealed the hair tufts had been stitched down the middle as though the hair were parted, and then glued to the wood. In decorating cloth or felt hats and caps the hair was sewed on with cotton thread.

Laboratory[1] examination of hair specimens taken from thirty examples in the Museum showed that human hair had been employed in twenty-four instances, horse tail in two, cow's tail attached to hide in one, blue-pelt[2] bear hair in another, and ordinary black bear fur in two. In each instance where hair other than human was employed, the object had been manufactured within the last fifty years.

That the practice of using human hair to decorate ceremonial paraphernalia is old on the Northwest Coast is demonstrated by two hair-decorated objects collected by Captain James Cook, one at Nootka and one from an unnamed place in 1778, figured by Inverarity (1950, plates, 139, 140). These probably antedate by a hundred years most of the specimens now in the Alaska Historical Museum yet the technique employed in applying the hair remains essentially the same.

In speculating on the origin of this use of human hair for decoration or to represent hair on masks or carvings it is significant that the near neighbors of the Tlingit used other materials and techniques. To the south, the Haida and Tsimshian represented hair in wood and argillite figurines and maskoids by carving a representation of it in great detail, portraying coiffures, knots, braids and ornaments. Farther south the Kwakiutl made great use of dyed and shredded red cedar bark to portray hair and to otherwise embellish ceremonial paraphernalia.

North and east of the Tlingit the Tahltan made use of hide fringes and porcupine quills for decorative purposes and to the northwest the Eskimos found tufts of caribou hair and feathers to suit their taste for ornament where the Tlingit chose human hair.

The Aleut in historic times seem to have favored the use of sea lion whiskers for decorative purposes and the use of them is reported by the earliest European navigators who visited the Aleutian Islands. However, Martin Sauer, secretary to the Billings Expedition (1785-94) figures six masks used by "Oonalashkans in their Dance" each decorated with hair, presumably human. Some of the tufts appear to be pegged in after the manner of the Tlingit, others being glued on (Billings, 1802, p. 272).

Lisiansky, describing a Kodiak shaman says in part, "He then disguises himself by a wig of human hair, to which two feathers are attached, one on each side, to resemble horns" (Lisiansky, 1814, p. 208).

In the Alaska Historical Museum is a Tlingit shaman's cap made of a human scalp to be worn as a wig. The similarity of the Aleut masks and Kodiak wig to Tlingit workmanship and usage suggests borrowing in that quarter, one way or another. Eight very early Aleut (?) masks, also in the Museum, which come from a cave at old Savonofski, also support the view that this practice was borrowed from the Tlingit, for none of them show any evidence of having been decorated with

[1]Hair was determined through the courtesy of the Federal Wildlife Research Laboratory, Denver, Colorado by Charles C. Sperry, Biologist.

[2]Blue pelt is a term used by the trade to indicate a black bear pelt of unusual quality.

hair. Since Eskimos living adjacent to the Aleuts do not follow the practice either, it seems reasonable to assume that the Aleuts borrowed the idea from the Tlingit.

The use of human hair to embellish the heads of human figurines, or masks portraying men, seems so natural a course it is remarkable it is not a universal practice. A deterrent could be the fear that the hair might fall into the possession of a sorcerer who might use it to work evil against the owner if alive, or his people if dead. Swan quotes Haidas as saying that they practiced cremation in enemy country to prevent enemies from digging up the body to make charms with which to destroy the Haida tribe (Swan, 1874, p. 9). Ordinarily Northwest Coast "witches" worked their hexes only on the person from whom they had obtained intimate objects such as parings, hair, perspiration, or sputum. Oberg states: "Sometimes the hair of dead slaves was fastened to the end of the batons" (n. d.). Slaves, dead or alive, are often given as the source of hair used in such decorations by Tlingit today, yet, upon close questioning they admit exceptions. In fact, in no case examined, where the source of the hair was known, had it come from the heads of slaves. It is a well-known fact that the Tlingit required their slaves to be shorn at all times. This was necessary, that free men would know how to address them. Because their hair was short the first white men who visited this coast were believed to be slaves.

Oberg further states: "At betrothal women of the *anyeti* (noble) class sometimes cut their hair and present it to the bridegroom's family; this hair is later displayed at the wedding ceremony and finally becomes an emblem of the bridegroom's clan . . . "(n. d.).

In speaking of the Tlingit dead, Oberg says in part, "through the sacred emblems and names he is still part of the community, and food is put into the fire at each potlatch so that the dead ancestors can enjoy it, for they are taking part in the proceedings going on in the sacred house—the center of the Tlingit world . . . " (n. d.).

It is the concept of hair as a sacred emblem or magical tie with deceased relatives in the spirit world that probably accounts for its use in most instances. A common belief is that the dead relative whose hair is used to ornament ceremonial batons is thereby enabled to share in the joy and happiness of the occasions on which these objects are used or displayed. And since these objects never were allowed to get out of posssion of the clan there was little danger that witches could obtain them to work their evil will.

In describing some Tsimshian portrait busts or images of men who died on the trails and had been cremated, between Kitwankool and Nass River, and between Hazelton and Kigagass, Emmons says in part, "These figures are called *Kitumghun,* 'Man of wood,' and were rare on account of their expense . . . In some instances the hair of the deceased was cut off and locks thereof inserted and pegged into small holes in the head of wood . . . " (Emmons, 1914, p. 64).

Niblack quotes a description of a Tlingit funeral by an anonymous writer as saying, "on one side of the room a young brave was busily

engaged with a pair of scissors cutting off the long, black hair of all the near relatives, male and female . . . " (Niblack, 1888, p. 358). He does not state to what use the hair was put, if any. There is considerable evidence that scalps were taken in war as trophies but nothing to show that the hair was ever used to embellish ceremonial objects.

The hair used to ornament the heads of two canoe figures now in the Alaska Historical Museum was taken from the heads of two slain chiefs "to give to the canoe spirit," according to an heir who had inherited the objects. The shaman rode in this specially-built war canoe on the expedition organized for the purpose of avenging the killing of the chiefs several years earlier. Thus, a magical power was ascribed to the hair employed in this instance.

Recently, according to an informant, an old Tlingit woman who had exceptionally long and beautiful hair died in a village near Juneau. Upon her death her hair was carefully cut off and put away by relatives as a keepsake.

Another informant (from Kake village) recalls a baton in Kake decorated with reddish-brown hair. It was his understanding that this particular shade of hair was considered proof of a line of Tsimshian ancestry from which this Tlingit clan was proud to have descended. The hair was preserved in the baton and displayed on auspicious occasions with the view to advertising this distinguished lineage.

From the information at hand it now appears that the history of each object decorated with hair must be sought out individually since there seems to be too many special reasons for its employment to generalize beyond Oberg's statement that the dead are still a part of the Tlingit community.

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