

**Cheryl SAMUEL, *The Raven's Tail* (Vancouver, University of British Columbia, 1987, 167 pp. ISBN 0-7748-0224-3 \$ 24.95 (paper))**

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The publication date of this landmark book coincides with the two-volume catalogue of *The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada's First Peoples* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart), where at least two lapses testify to the lacunae of knowledge that *The Raven's Tail* fills. Nobody now needs to confuse a Raven's Tail Robe with a Chilkat Dancing Blanket, or underestimate the number of Raven's Tail Robes in the world's collections. No fault can be attributed to *The Spirit Sings'* lapses; the boundaries of knowledge about North Pacific Coast art have been widened considerably by Cheryl Samuel's excellent work. Indeed, one can compare it best to her equally valuable *The Chilkat Dancing Blanket* (Seattle: Pacific Search Press, 1982), in which the two Raven's Tail Robes illustrated in *The Spirit Sings* had previously appeared.

The Raven's Tail Robe was a garment woven by North Pacific Coast women, probably Tlingit, applying twine-weaving techniques derived from their superb spruce-root basketry to mountain goat wool with additions of fur. Made to be worn by members of the nobility, such robes are distinguished by a number of significant features. Not least of them is the fact that the designs were created by women, unlike the Chilkat Dancing Blankets where male-designed formline motifs were skillfully adapted by women to twine-weaving. The designs of most Raven's Tail Robes consist of field compositions (some extremely complex) bearing motifs based upon natural forms: phenomena such as the woodworm, the butterfly, the brown bear, the killer whale, the raven, the eye, the fireweed, the tattoo pattern, the raven's tail, and most poetically, "the echo of the spirit-voice of the tree reflected in the shadow." Many of these beings appear as crests in the streamlined naturalism of male-dominated carving, but are expressed here in the abstract forms most readily generated by textile procedures. The central field, which may include long black tassels, is surrounded by a complex border of varying motifs, and the edges are finished with white fringe. The colouring consists primarily of black and white with passages of what may once have been brilliant yellow.

The robes are gloriously luxurious and gorgeously complex; in one the design field is divided in two halves so that the wearer presents a completely different image from alternate views; in another there are *three* divisions, so that the viewer's impression changes from back to each side. These sophisticated works accord with the Native aesthetic

of assymetry posited by Ruth B. Philips in her seminal essay on "Northern Woodlands Artistic Traditions" in *The Spirit Sings*, demonstrating the ubiquity of this aesthetic.

Beyond the delight given by these aesthetic achievements, to the art historian and indeed to anyone concerned with native textile traditions, the revelation of a rich phase of costume for the nobility distinct from and prior to the Chilkat Blanket phase is most exciting. Clearly, the aesthetic history of the North Pacific Coast is not and never was a mere continuation of the "anthropological present", varying only from people to people. Here we see the development of and passing from one stylistic period to another. The transitional robe—of those extant or documented—is the "Skatins' Robe", purchased from Alfred Skatins at Gitlaxdamks (Gitlakdamix), a village of the Nishga (Nisga'a) on the Nass River in British Columbia, by Marius Barbeau in 1927.

The Skatins' Robe is shaped like a Raven's Tail Robe with border and field, but the border contains human heads (with long attached fringes representing hair) and the field contains Eye and Wingtip formline elements. How the holders of the Skoten name (a name of extremely high status over a number of generations) obtained this magnificent work from the Tlingit is not recorded. The Skotens were members of the Gitskansnat subclan of the Laxkibu (Wolf) Clan. The Nishga are near neighbours of the Tlingit, located to the south and east of them, and Nishga tradition holds that some of their people are derived from the Tlingit, particularly among the Wolf and Eagle Clans.

With her extraordinary weaver's skills, Cheryl Samuel has managed the near-impossible by completely analyzing and explaining the complex weaving techniques, not only in photographs but also in words. Because twined weaving can be executed collectively, she has also created with other weavers superb versions of robes known only in early drawings, paintings, and photographs. Her book also provides exquisite pen drawings of damaged or incomplete robes.

The recreation of Raven's Tail Robes in the present is a revival of a noble tradition; one awaits with delighted anticipation Cheryl Samuel's next indispensable book, whatever its subject may be.

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