



Bent-Corner Chest

Haisla or Coast Tsimshian, c. 1840-1860

Red cedar, red turban snail opercula

This exceptional bent-corner chest is part of a body of work that comes from the hand of one of the most imaginative master painters of any region on the Northwest Coast. This artist's innovative interpretations of the traditional chest-design structure produced one of if not the most creative and unusual styles of design work from the historic period. The growing collection of attributed examples of his style appears to date from the mid-nineteenth century. Only a handful of his works are known, though one by one over time additional examples have come to light. The painted designs of this particular chest, the most recent example to appear, illustrates the artist's outstanding mastery of innovation in Northwest Coast art. This artist was evidently a free-spirited thinker, who came to view the northern painting tradition of his ancestors and most contemporaries more as a point of departure for creative experimentation than as a set of inviolable rules and conventions. The results of his creativity constitute a group of painted chests that are among the most creative and imaginative works that survive from the historic northern Northwest Coast.

Bent-corner chest and box designs have followed a comparatively restricted overall format since some time before the second half of the eighteenth century. The image that is commonly represented, the 'creature of the box' as it were, is often referred to as the Gonakadeit, the powerful spirit of the undersea world and the master and source of all wealth. One purpose of the image was to protect the contents from intrusions by the uninitiated and less powerful. The paintings are highly stylized and abstracted in the conventions of the northern coast design tradition. Chests and boxes from the eighteenth and very early nineteenth centuries represented this image with comparatively broad primary form lines and simple, uncomplicated red secondary elements. The great majority of nineteenth-century artists evolved to embellish the traditional chest-design format with ever-greater detail and elaboration, primarily in the red secondary design areas, bringing the northern style to a peak of elaborated development in the period between about 1840

and 1860. This peak was maintained but not truly surpassed in the following decades, eventually devolving into remnants of the older work and less traditionally based design styles toward the end of the nineteenth century.



An eighteenth-century style chest, Tlingit or Tsimshian, c. 1750-1800. Private collection. This chest illustrates the broad primary formline/simple red secondary element style of design from the early historic period.



A typical mid-nineteenth-century style chest, c. 1840-1860. UBC Museum of Anthropology. This chest illustrates the extent of evolution toward thin primary and secondary formlines with elaborated red secondary complexes, while retaining essentially the same primary formline composition as the previous chest.

The painter of the subject chest, on the other hand, struck out in a new and uncharted direction that differed from almost all other Northwest Coast painters. This artist combined the stark simplicity of the eighteenth-century broad primary-formline style with the fineness and delicacy of mid-nineteenth-century thin-formline red secondary elements. This innovative style further incorporated the very uncommon technique of red-over-black painting to a much greater degree than it had ever appeared previously. The most unusual and innovative aspects of this painter's work include the expansion of the broad black formlines until they nearly become a background color, and the regular use of red "shadow" lines within the shapes surrounded by broad black primary line work.



Another example of work by the painter of the subject chest, illustrating his unique design style. Collected by Howard Roloff at Koksilah, BC. Private collection.

In the masterful compositions of this artist, the conventional chest-design format is present, but only in a highly adapted and inventively modified manner. The large central mask-like face takes the place of the more typical formline-style head of the Gonakadeit, as seen in the ‘classic’ chest illustrated, and the formline structures that more conventionally surround the central head have been altered in scale and rearranged in completely “un-traditional” ways. Tradition is an evolving concept, however, and what is once new often becomes an embedded part of future design conventions.

In the subject chest, the main head occupies the upper half of the center design field, with the body area directly below it. Large, broad formline shapes extend downward from each lower corner of the central head, and these turn gracefully outward as they meet the bottom of the chest. On one side of the chest, these features are noticeably wider than they are on the other. (In this chest, it’s difficult to distinguish front and back, as their characteristics are so similar, even in the use of opercula inlay in the lid. The joined corner is generally in the back, however.) The hands of the main image, typically composed outside the formlines of the body as in the classic example above, are here painted in red directly onto the broad black forms below the head. On the wider of the black forms, the red hand includes a red arm formline that connects it to the body. A typical red secondary design of very thin formlines fills the body area defined by the broad black forms. These complexes are similar in composition, but differ in width from the front to the back of the chest.

The formline ovoids typically seen in the upper corners of a chest design appear just below the corners here, surrounded by a broad black formline and the unique red shadow line of this artist’s style. Below these, on both front and back of the chest, are thin red-formline secondary complexes, typical of the kind seen on each side of the central head in a classic format chest. The chest collected at Koksilah is similar in composition, yet it

focuses more on the corner ovoids of the conventional format, on one side both the upper and lower ovoids appear. The upper ovoids are surrounded by broad formlines shadowed in red, while the lower ovoids are outlined by both a very broad black formline and a thin formline that describes the human hand of the central image, which is painted directly on the black form as is seen on the subject example. On the other side of that chest, the red secondary complex from the sides of the head in the standard format takes the place of the upper corner ovoid, thus completing the collection of classic format design units.

The subject chest, as well as the additional example shown from Koksilah, illustrate a fine encapsulation of the standard or classic design composition, a poetic form of the prosaic convention, still containing most of the traditional chest-design forms. The artist challenged himself to render the designs in this abbreviated way, combining the broad formlines of the archaic tradition with the thin formlines of the then contemporary peak of design evolution. These are masterful pieces of work in the small but significant number of attributions to this painter's artistic legacy. Throughout the paintings on this chest and the others noted above and below, the fineness of the line work and the definition of forms are exceptional in execution, indicating an experienced painter whose brush skills were as well developed as his compositional ideas and innovations. The painter of these chests appears to have developed his unconventional design ideas through a series of progressive compositions, the survivors of which are distributed through a number of museums and private collections today.

Page 167 of *The Transforming Image* (McLennan and Duffek, 2000) illustrates paintings on three containers that can readily be attributed to the maker of this chest. (In that book, though, the authors attributed the chests to the Heiltsuk, as well as to an earlier time period. My consistent study of Northwest Coast art history leads me to believe, however, that the style of these works was not created prior to about 1840. The artist may have been Heiltsuk, but the formality of his compositions and their close relationship to other more northern works suggest to me an original provenance of Haisla or Coast Tsimshian for these chest paintings). The three chests illustrated in *TTI* are held in the following museums: the Glenbow Museum, the RBCM, and UCLA.



Two sides of a painted chest, now in the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, Alberta.



Painted chest now in the Royal British Columbia Museum, Victoria.



Painted chest attributed to this artist, now in the art museum at UCLA.

Of these, I would attribute the Glenbow and the RBCM chests to the earliest period in this artist's series of innovative works, and the UCLA chest to the latest period of work, one that perhaps closely followed the creation of the Koksilah chest. The subject example would best fit in the middle of these two periods, as it shows somewhat equal ties to both the earlier and the later attributed examples. (The artist may well have spent the very earliest part of his career painting wholly conventional chest designs, only moving into these more innovative styles after a time of apprenticeship.)

Each of these three chests' end paintings show rectilinear black bands in conjunction with fineline work, though these also contain horizontal bands as well as vertical ones.

Another chest painting by this artist is part of a private collection, and is illustrated in *Native Visions* (Brown, 1998), page 110. I would attribute the creation of this composition to the middle/late period of the artist's work, after the Glenbow and RBCM chests, and probably before the painting of the Koksilah example. The subject painting most likely came between the example shown above and the RBCM painting, though this timeline is purely conjectural, and has little bearing on the attributions themselves, which are all apparently the work of this single exceptional artist.



Two chest panels illustrated in *Native Visions*, from a private collection.

An additional example of this artist's work is recorded on the Burke Museum photo videodisk, from an unknown private collection, frame #23185. A closely related work, though probably by a different artist, is in the American Museum of Natural History [16/4969] also on the videodisk.

Similar characteristics can be seen in the works of only a few northern artists, some possibly Tsimshian or Haisla and some from farther south, in the central Northwest Coast region of the Heiltsuk. It is possible that one Tsimshian or Haisla artist created similar designs with broad primary formlines and very slim-formline secondary compositions. This may have been a close contemporary of the maker of this chest, and most probably influenced by his work, or it could be the same painter exhibiting slightly different forms in the painting. One example of this type, only slightly different in certain characteristics from the previous works, is illustrated in *The Transforming Image*, pg. 169 [fig. 6.26A], and is from the collection of the McCord Museum. A somewhat larger chest, it may be that the larger design field called for greater elaboration of the design and more detail within the areas defined by the broad formlines. Like the subject chest and previous examples, the center ovoids seem slightly lower on the right (facing) lower corners than on the left side, suggesting the same painter's predilections. One side of this chest, on the left below, includes the red shadow lines inside of the black primary forms, while they appear to be lacking on the side shown to the right.



Heavily worn chest painting, McCord Museum of Canadian History, Montreal.

Another chest painting illustrated on the same page [fig. 6.26B] is more closely related to the work on the previous chests, and may with more certainty be by the same painter. It is identified by the authors in that case as being of Tsimshian creation (not Heiltsuk as attributed to the others). That chest is in the British Museum [AM 1976.03.40a-d], and was originally collected on Haida Gwaii, the Queen Charlotte Islands.



Elaborate chest painting now in the British Museum, London.

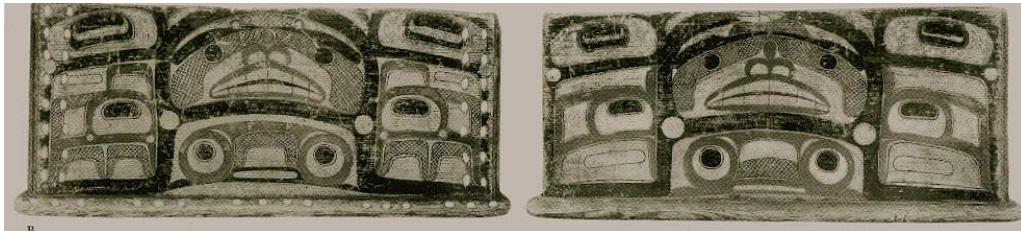
Although the same in most other characteristics, it does not seem to include the use of the red shadow lines seen in most others of this artist's work. It has many other similarities in the general flow and proportions of the formline painting style, though it is generally more complex overall than the other examples cited herein, and employs a full formline design on the end panels instead of the rectilinear forms seen on the other examples. Again, this is a larger chest, which may have called for a more elaborate and detailed composition from the painter.

Two other related paintings, though clearly by different artists, are also illustrated in *The Transforming Image*, appearing on page 168. Figure 6.25A is a small chest that is most likely Heiltsuk, and exhibits many similarities to the work on the subject chest, but is surely the work of another artist. This painting lacks a similar level of refinement in individual forms as well as in the composition overall. Several of the painted features in this work are much less formally northern in style, strongly suggesting a central coast/Heiltsuk origin.



Related painting from a chest collected on the Nimpkish River, Vancouver Island, though probably Heiltsuk in origin.

Figure 6.25B, a very unusual composition, shows a much more conventionally northern approach to design element shapes and composition, and is possibly from a Haisla or Coast Tsimshian artist, though it may also be from a Heiltsuk artist with more northern leanings than the previous work. Very similar in painterly style to the subject chest and the others, this example nonetheless contains enough characteristics that differ from that artist's work to distinguish the two as separate painters.



A related chest painting from the same time period (or slightly earlier) and the same cultural region as the subject chest. Now in the Field Museum, Chicago, collected on Kuper Island reserve, BC, but probably Heiltsuk, Haisla, or Coast Tsimshian in origin.

The painter of this example has a more rectilinear composition style and different positive-negative proportions than are seen in the subject chest group. The use of opercula inlay on the chest surface within the design itself is very unusual, and also doesn't appear in the subject group. This work is probably by a contemporary of the subject artist, which allows for the possibility of mutual influence between the two men.

The innovative nature of the subject painter's work truly sets it apart from the vast majority of northern Northwest Coast painting, particularly on chests and boxes. These bent-corner containers are nearly always painted with designs that follow the highly conventionalized style that evolved from the archaic design principles of the early historic period. This small group of related works stands out distinctly from that majority of conventional images. It is in these imaginative compositions that this artist really "broke the mold" established by the formal northern painting tradition, and moved into entirely new and uncharted territory. By recognizing his skill and talent in composition and painting, even in the absence of specific information about the artist that is lacking in the historical record, such as his name and home village location, we celebrate the innovator in the crowd. Northwest Coast art becomes a less impersonal tradition, and we can see more clearly how individual artists have been able to stand out among their peers and contemporaries. Few practicing Native artists today have reached the same degree of innovation shown in these paintings, executed over a century and a half ago, which serves

Ethnographic Consultation

351 Dungeness Meadows

360-681-7555

to elevate the work of this painter even higher in relation to the rest of the historic Northwest Coast tradition.

Steven Clay Brown

Sequim, WA, 98382

Steven C. Brown

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