



Across North America, native Americans have traditionally included rattles in their elaborate ceremonies; Northwest Coast rattles exceed all others in their variety and complexity. Used as accompaniment for dances extolling social rank and by shamans to heal persons or to contact spirit helpers, Northwest Coast rattles imply the presence of supernatural powers. The distinctive sound of rattles is believed to act as a channel to the spiritual realm. Said to have been invented by the carvers of the Nass River people, the Nishga, raven rattles were produced by several different groups as far south as the Kwa'kiutl area during the nineteenth century. The majority of these rattles depict Raven, or Yahl, a mythological being who figures prominently in Northwest Coast creation stories. A few rattles depict other birds.

This rattle reveals an intricate tableau from the natural and supernatural worlds. In its oversize bill the raven holds a small, round red object, which may represent the daylight or possibly the fire that Yahl carried in his bill. A creature with the head of a bear or wearing a bear mask reclines on the raven's back. The body of the bear figure was apparently broken off and replaced with crudely fashioned appendages, although the feet are original. The tongue of the bear figure arches up and is grasped in the bill of a large bird head, which rests on the wings of the raven. The long-beaked bird resembles the kingfisher, and its jutting crest feathers act as the raven's tail. The raven's underside is decorated in fine, low relief with the face of

RAVEN RATTLE

Canadian, British Columbia, Queen Charlotte Islands,
Haida, mid-19th century.

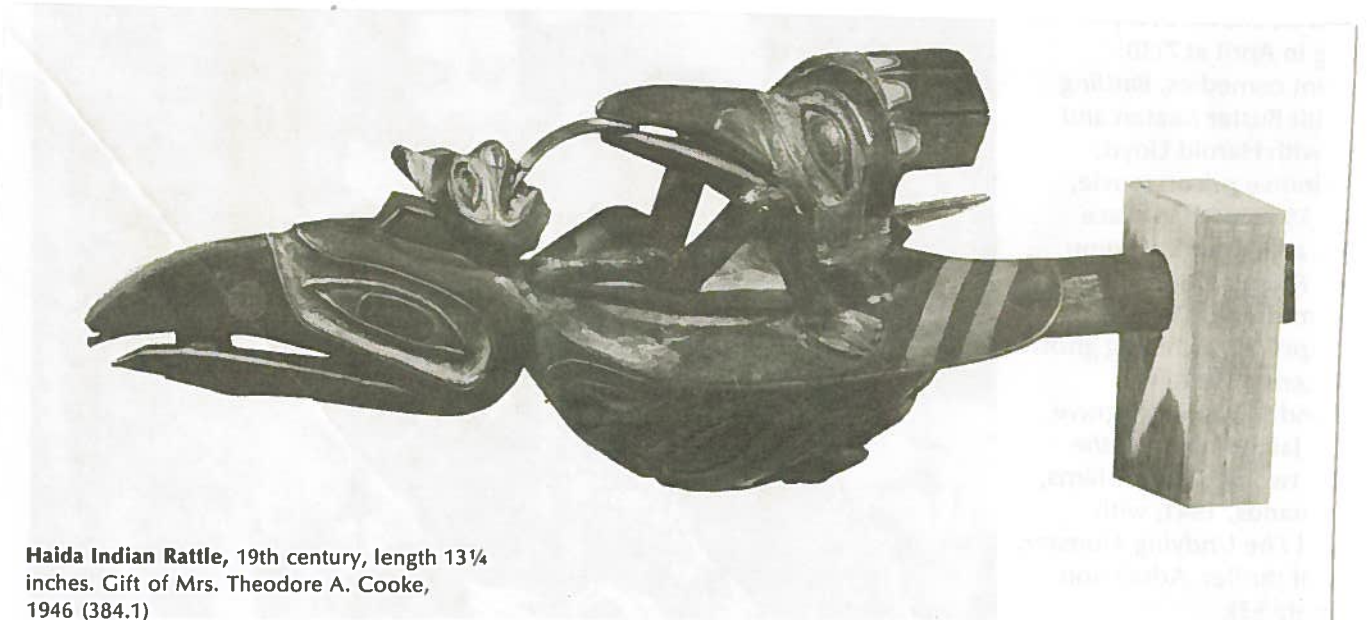
Wood: l. 13¼ in. (33.7 cm.)

Gift of Mrs. Theodore A. Cooke, 1946 (384.1)

what appears to be a hawk. The downturned beak of the creature is grasped in the mouth of a tiny frog that crouches below. The frog and the bear figure are found on only a few Northwest rattles, all of which are of the highest quality.

Another unusual aspect of this rattle is its composition from a single piece of wood. The solid handle merges into the globular body, which has been split all around under the wings and displays no joinery. Behind the kingfisher's head is a hole, now plugged, which may have been used to introduce sound-producing pebbles or shot. Generally, the exchange or joining of tongues, or tongues and beaks (which occurs twice on the Academy piece), is believed to symbolize communication or possibly a transfer of power. Although most authorities today believe that raven rattles were used by Northwest shamans, native informants told researchers at the turn of the century that the rattles were used by chiefs during dances. A chiefly dancer would hold a raven rattle down and to the side with its belly up, for, it was said, if the rattle were held upright, the raven might fly away. RAD

384.1



Haida Indian Rattle, 19th century, length 13¼ inches. Gift of Mrs. Theodore A. Cooke, 1946 (384.1)

April, 1984 Haida, mid 19c, Canadian, British Columbia. Queen Charlotte Islands: wood



RAVEN RATTLE

British Columbia, Haida

Mid-19th century; polychromed wood

Gift of Mrs. Theodore Cooke, 1946 (384.1)

In Indian folklore the raven is a culture hero. He is the subject of numerous legends describing his supernatural powers and inventions in the world's early days. It was Raven who liberated the daylight, invented fresh water and rivers, brought Salmon, controlled the tides, and gave fire to the world.