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### **Chilkat Tunics: Toward a Reassessment of the Configurative**

Compared to the scholarship devoted to Chilkat blankets, Chilkat tunics remain relatively unstudied. George T. Emmons devoted a total of five paragraphs to the tunic in his 1907 monograph on the Chilkat Blanket; Franz Boas, in his notes to Emmons' text, added a sixth, and slightly disparaging, paragraph on what he considered the "degeneration" of tunic crest design. In her 1982 book *The Chilkat Dancing Blanket*, Cheryl Samuel suggested tantalizing possibilities for the relationship between tunic designs and house posts—possibilities I would like to expand on in this paper—but her focus on the blanket barred any further analysis of the tunic. Overall, then, the Chilkat tunic remains a little studied form of Tlingit crest art, despite the fact that Emmons noted in 1907 that the tunic "commands double or treble the price" of the Chilkat blanket and was obviously held in high esteem (1907:365).

My talk today attempts a more focused study on Chilkat tunics, particularly with regard to the crest designs woven on the tunics' front panels. Over the past two years I've had the opportunity to study several tunics in museums and private collections, and I'd like to try to weave together, as it were, my own research with the literature we have on Chilkat tunics. As the title of the paper suggests, I am especially interested in the tunic as a site for the supposed shift to "configurative design" in Chilkat weaving, a design style that Bill Holm defined as that which depicts "an essentially-animal like silhouette, perhaps occupying a great part of the decorated field but not distorted so as to fill

it entirely” (1965:12). The Brown Bear on the Kaagwaantaan Brown Bear House tunic in Fig. 1 is a good example of what Holm would call “configurative design”: here the “essentially animal-like silhouette” of the brown bear is retained in a figure that covers the main field of the tunic’s front panel. This is in contrast to the “distributive” design of the tunic in Fig. 2, a tunic now at the American Museum of Natural History, where the figure depicted is difficult to decipher because it is “distributed” across the design field and does not preserve the configurative animal-like silhouette. (Emmons wrote that this tunic depicted was a killer whale while Swanton argued it was Gonakadeit, a discrepancy that points to the difficulty in “reading” distributive design.) Distributive design is more common to Chilkat blankets, like the blanket at the Hearst Museum depicted in Fig. 3, where the figure of the crest animal is distributed across the entire design field and is not easily recognizable as a silhouette.

The increasing prevalence of configurative designs on tunics was noted by both Emmons and Boas in their 1907 study of Chilkat weaving; for Boas especially, configurative design was a marker of Chilkat weaving’s “degeneration.” Both ethnographers, of course, were pre-Bill Holm and used the term “realistic” to describe designs we would call today “configurative.” Both writers also viewed “realistic” design as a later-comer to the design styles in Chilkat weaving. As Emmons wrote, “It [the tunic] is undoubtedly the latest product of the loom; and judging from its great abundance among the Tlingit, and its more marked realism of design—which feature characterizes the art of this people—it seems more like that it originated with them” (1907: 336). Emmons viewed realistic designs as evidence of the tunics’ relative lateness in the genealogy of Chilkat weaving and a design indicative of its Tlingit origin. Boas,

however, saw “realistic designs” in a much harsher light, one that reflects his outlook as a “salvage ethnographer,” attempting to save anything he could in the face of what he believed was the immanent extinction of Northwest Coast cultures. Driven by this belief, Boas was alert for any sign of change from what he considered “traditional”; for him, configurative design of Chilkat tunics as an especially worrisome marker of change: “It has evidently not flourished for a long time,” Boas wrote of Chilkat tunics, “for modern shirts are degenerating even more than the blanket designs, and realistic forms are quite commonly found on them” (1907:398). Configurative design for Boas marked a decline from classical Chilkat weaving design, implying that weavers and their pattern designers were losing their skills as Northwest Coast artists or being tainted by western “realistic” influence. In either case, the presence of configurative design was cause, in Boas’s view, for some alarm.

While it may be true that “configurative” design was a relatively recent innovation within Chilkat weaving, I want to suggest an alternative read to Boas’ “degeneration” for Chilkat tunic design. It seems to me that the configurative was a well-established tradition in the three-dimensional carvings of house posts, which Cheryl Samuel suggested briefly provided patterns for Chilkat tunics. The vertical, three-dimensional design space of a house post allowed for the embodiment, as it were, of a configurative design, which was translated onto the vertical, two-dimensional surface of the Chilkat tunic. Instead of degeneration, then, we could see the configurative design in tunics as an innovative translation of a traditional design from three-dimensional carving traditions to two-dimensional painting and weaving. In this paper I want to provide some

examples of tunics that I believe provide evidence for a reevaluation of configurative tunic design.

### **Precedents of Design for Chilkat Tunics**

Before I launch completely into my thesis, however, let me back up for a moment to review what we know about Chilkat tunics and their design. Emmons, as we've seen, wrote that the tunic was the "most recent" in the genealogy of Chilkat weaving, with aprons being woven first, blankets second, and tunics last. Because of this late date, Emmons also argued that the tunic was specifically *Tlingit* in origin, for the Tsimshian who invented the "Chilkat" weaving technique do not seem to have woven tunics. Moreover, Emmons pointed out that the tunic's shape is directly related to Tlingit hide armor, which he argues explains why the early Tlingit name for the tunic was *qeka*, translated as "cover" or "protector":

The long sleeveless shirt, hanging from the shoulders and reaching below the knees, is in shape a replica of the primitive hide armor, from which it derives its name, *qeka* ('cover' or 'protector'); but today it is more often called *kudás* ('sleeveless shirt') to which is prefixed the name of the design, as *xuts kudás* ('brown bear shirt') or *gotc kudás* ('wolf shirt'); but in a general way it is spoken of as *nax'een kudás* ('Chilkat blanket work shirt'). (Emmons 1907)

An 1895 photograph by Winter & Pond (Fig. 4) illustrates Emmons's link between the old hide tunics and woven Chilkat tunics: it depicts the Klukwan chief Coudawot in a hide tunic on the left and Yeil gooxu, Louis Shotridge's father, in the Chilkat tunic on the right. Here we can see the similarities in form between the two tunic



types, which suggests good reason to believe Emmons' account that the woven tunic is based on the hide tunic. A very similar, or possibly the same painted hide tunic, is now at the University of Pennsylvania Museum, though it does not have the fur lining on the bottom and is identified as being collected in Sitka.

It's also interesting to note that the ties on all of the Chilkat tunics I have seen so far close the tunic on the wearer's *right*, as indicated in this drawing from Cheryl Samuel's book of a tunic from the Canadian Museum of Civilization (Fig. 5). From what I have learned talking with Steve Henrikson, hide armor was also tied on the right, in order to protect the wearer's left side with the full wrap of the hide. Such protection on the left was desirable, as a right-handed warrior would turn his left side toward the enemy as he held his shield in his left hand and wielded his knife or club in his right, so that the hide tunic would completely wrap around his left side, while his right side would have the vulnerable openings between the ties angled away from the onslaught. Much more could be explored on this relationship between hide tunics and woven Chilkat tunics, but it is apparent that there are strong connections between the two.

A further clue to tunic design comes from the pattern boards from which women wove the tunic designs. As we know, men painted these pattern boards and women wove the designs into the Chilkat tunics and blankets; thus these boards could be used to produce multiple tunics of a similar design. For example, a pattern board that I researched at the Portland Art Museum corresponds to several tunics inside and outside this museum's collection. This pattern board contains designs for two different tunics on either of its sides (Fig. 6 a, b). One side depicts a pattern very similar to the sleeved tunic in the Portland Art Museum's collection, which is said to have belonged to Situk Jim of

Yakutat (Fig. 7) and which is very similar to another sleeved brown bear tunic recently displayed at the National Museum of the American Indian (Fig. 8). (We also saw this pattern on the tunic worn by George Shotridge in Fig. 4.) That multiple tunics were based on a single pattern board was confirmed by a woman identified as “Mrs. Williams of Klukwan,” who sold the Portland Art Museum’s pattern board to Axel Rasmussen in 1944. Mrs. Williams said that “she herself had made three tunics from this pattern and that a Mrs. Benson had made several more” (Gunther 1966:207), including the tunic owned by Seetuk Jim of Yakutat.

On the reverse side of this pattern board (Fig. 6b) is a double-headed raven design, from which Erna Gunther wrote that “only two shirts were made, both by Mrs. Williams” (1966:207). More recently, however, in the University of Pennsylvania’s *Objects of Everlasting Esteem* catalogue, Nora Dauenhauer identified this pattern as the Two Door House tunic from the village of Kluctoo or Twelve Mile near Klukwan. Dauenhauer notes that there were *three* tunics made from this pattern, one at the university of Pennsylvania Museum, one at the Portland Art Museum, and one at the Denver Art Museum (Fig. 9 a,b,c).

However, at a recent show outside San Francisco, I chanced upon what seems to be a *fourth* Two Door House tunic that Bonhams & Butterfields auction house would sell in June 2007 (Fig. 10). This tunic is different in some ways than the three other tunics we just saw, particularly in the red lining of mouth of the ravens. But it’s interesting that this tunic seems to be the only design that follows the Portland pattern board’s U-forms at the top corners; the other three tunics use an opercula-like band around the outer edge and do not include these U-forms. It’s also significant that the only tunic that actually

corresponds to this pattern board's turning of the bottom raven's head to the left is the tunic now at UPenn, which was woven by Jennie Thlunaut.

Pattern boards and hide armor thus contributed to the design of Chilkat tunics. In what remains of this paper, I want to consider the relationship of configurative design in Chilkat tunics to another source in Tlingit crest art: namely, the painted and carved house posts inside the Tlingit clan house, which evince a long tradition of configurative three-dimensional design.

### **Reevaluating Configurative Design**

Chilkat weaving design is intimately linked to the painting and carving traditions of Northwest Coast crest design: as we know, women wove from pattern boards that men painted with crest designs. Boas pointed out early on this relationship between Chilkat blanket design and carved and painted bentwood boxes, noting that the blanket design followed a similar hierarchical structure of the box's main central panel flanked by two side panels (1907:397). When worn, the blanket even "bends," as it were, at the "kerfs" of the wearer's shoulders, making an interesting parallel between woven and painted designs. Is there such a relationship between an established painting and carving tradition and Chilkat *tunic* design?

In a fleeting note in her book on Chilkat blankets, Cheryl Samuel wrote that there was "a striking similarity between [house post] painted boards and the shape of and designs on the front panels of the woven tunics....The house post boards seem to have sloping shoulder lines, necklines and some even have hatch marks which are identical in their placement to shoulder gussets of the tunics" (1982:38). The format of the house post board—its vertical, frontal plane—is, as Samuel suggested, very similar to the front and back

panels of a Chilkat tunic, and although Samuel did not develop her analysis of this relationship further, considerable evidence supports the link between tunic and house post board design.

Samuel limits her published example to a painted house post *board* (Fig. 11), like the old Whale House boards, whose distributive design we should perhaps expect given its planar format. But another form class of house posts also existed in Tlingit houses: namely, house posts “proper,” the spruce or cedar logs, in the round, that held up the beams of the ceiling and which were the predecessors of exterior “totem” poles (Jonaitis 1999:107). In the house post format, the design field was three-dimensional; there was no need to spread the figures flat across the plane of a board when the figure could be “contained” in the very volume of the spruce or cedar log, allowing for a configurative design that retained the “general silhouette” of the figure depicted. For example, the oldest Tlingit house posts still extant are said to be the Naanyaa.aayi posts (Fig. 12) in the Dog Fish House (Chief Shakes’ house), carved by the late eighteenth-century Tlingit artist Kajisdu.axc II. Steve Brown dates these posts to the last quarter of the eighteenth century; certainly the Naanyaa.aayi already had the house posts when they abandoned their village of Kasitlaan in the 1830s to move closer to trade at the Russian fort in Wrangell (Keithan 1940:7). The three-dimensional, configurative design of figures like the monster Gonakadeit are strong examples of an early configurative carving tradition. Klukwan also had configurative carving in their house posts, such as the Woodworm and Raven posts in the new Whale House—also carved by Kajisdu.axc (Fig.13).

I believe there is evidence that the configurative design in these house posts can be related to the configurative design in Chilkat tunics. For example, the Multiplying Wolf tunic of the Kaagwaantaan in Sitka (Fig. 14) clearly relates to a configurative house post of

the same name (Fig. 15). The unique face (Fig. 16) on the back of a tunic woven by Jennie Thlunaut is almost certainly quoting the configurative face of the Woodworm crest on the famous house post in the Gaanaxteidi clan Whale House in Klukwan (the Woodworm is the topmost figure on the left house post in Fig. 13). And, although it is not a house post, the configurative design of the Many Faces house screen of Chief Shakes at Wrangell (Fig. 17) seems closely related, as Bill Holm has pointed out, to the configurative Brown Bear of the Kaagwaantaan Brown Bear tunic from Klukwan (Fig. 1), pointing again to configurative design relationships between carved and painted designs in Tlingit houses and those of Chilkat tunics.

There also seems to be a relationship between house post design and the “ghost” or “spirit” face that Emmons noted was the signature motif on the back panel of Chilkat tunics (Fig. 18). The ghost face, which Samuel describes as a “little face with round wide eyes, a mouth without teeth, and a nose without a bridge” (1982:236), features prominently just below the neckline on the tunic, sometimes shown inverted but often upright. The motif appears occasionally on medicine pouches and leggings, but to my knowledge it has never appeared on a Chilkat blanket. Evelyn Vanderhoop told me the inverted face suggested the wearer’s debt to repay the viewer with another potlatch, while the right-side-up face indicated no obligation. But if the symbolism of the ghost face is clear, no one seems to know where the face came from or why it is associated with the tunic in particular. I would suggest that the motif originated with house post board design—more specifically house post boards in Klukwan, where Emmons argues the Chilkat tunic originated—and was translated onto the tunic like so many other house post board motifs. The most striking possible model I have found for the ghost face appears on two house post boards from the old Whale House in Klukwan, now at the Portland Art

Museum (Fig. 19). On one pair of boards (the photograph depicts one board from each pair), an inverted, round-eyed, nose-less face appears at the top center. Interestingly, these faces seem related to the dog fish face that appears on the other two post boards, with its round eyes and gill slits denoting its shark-like species. The old Whale House post boards are some of the oldest from Klukwan—abandoned when the Old Whale House was dissented, they were later brought inside the new Whale House when it was built in the early nineteenth century (Jonaitis 1986:117); the designs on the boards were well known in Klukwan. The ghost face motif is yet another example that supports Samuel’s hypothesis of related house post board and tunic design.

The configurative was, then, an established style within the three-dimensional format of Tlingit house posts, and the configurative design in tunics, I argue, belongs to this particular sequence. Indeed the tunic, when donned by a human body, takes on a three-dimensionality that mimics a kind of house post, where the body, wrapped in a tunic bearing the clan house crest, *enacts* a kind of house post. The length of the tunic fully encloses the body in the crest figure; its scooping neckline, framing the neck that rises to hold the human head, mimics the real circular indentation in the house post where the great beam of the roof will rest. In these terms, the house post constitutes a very different spatiality than the planar box-derived Chilkat blanket: a vertical, three-dimensional wooden format lent itself well to a vertically-oriented, volumetric, bilaterally symmetrical—*configurative*—figure.

Configurative design did not represent “degeneration” in Chilkat weaving, as Boas had argued. The design style had long existed in the three-dimensional art of the house post and on the two-dimensional painted screen; given the stronger relationship between tunic and house post design, we should in fact *expect* that configurative would appear on the Chilkat tunic. Granted, I have not established any dates for the early appearance of/the

transfer to configurative design on Chilkat tunics, but I have shown that there was a long-standing tradition of configurative style available for crest designers of Chilkat tunics. The turn from distributive design, in my argument, was not due to the designer's "lack of ability" but represented a *choice* to follow a different form class of Northwest Coast design, a choice which made sense for the design field of the Chilkat tunic. Erna Gunther noted that "the vertical orientation of the shirt does not allow the repetitions of design on the side panels like the blanket but makes, rather, for a design placement comparable to that on a totem pole" (1966:81). The tunic shared the post-like, vertical format of house post "poles" which their configurative design recalled.

*I would like to thank Joe Hotch for welcoming questions on the Kaagwaantaan Brown Bear Tunic, which catalyzed a larger study of Chilkat tunics. A more detailed analysis of the Kaagwaantaan Brown Bear tunic is the subject of my master's thesis, which is available on-line at the University of California, Berkeley's on-line dissertation webpage. I welcome information others may have on Chilkat tunics: please email me at [emilylmoore@berkeley.edu](mailto:emilylmoore@berkeley.edu).*

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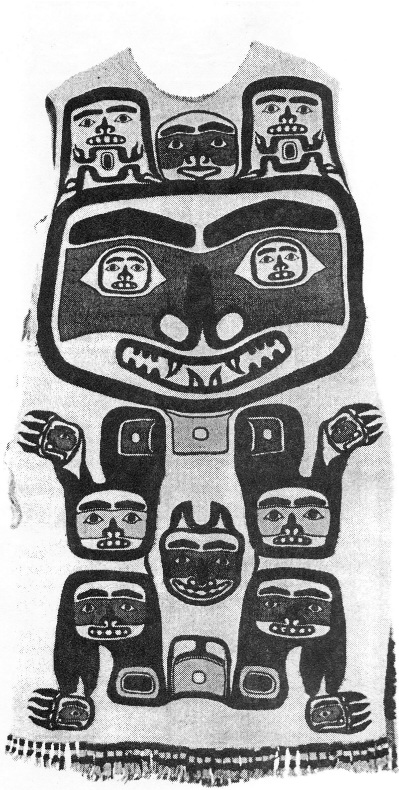
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**Fig. 1 Kaagwaantaan Brown Bear Tunic, configurative design of brown bear**  
**(Photo: Hearst Museum)**



**Fig. 2 Chilkat Tunic with distributive design (Photo: American Museum of Natural History)**



**Figure 3: Chilkat Blanket with paneled distributive design, probably “Diving Killer Whale.” Mountain goat wool, cedar bark, natural dye. Private Collection. (From Samuel 1982)**



**Figure 4: Two chiefs wearing tunics, Klukwan, Alaska, 1895. Coudahwot's tunic on the left is painted moose hide, similar to the hide tunics Emmons described as the protective layer worn beneath armor (1907:346); Yeilgooxu wears a woven Chilkat tunic on the right. (Winter & Pond photo: Alaska State Library 87-296)**



**Fig. 5 Drawing of Chilkat tunic showing side ties on right side of tunic (from Samuel 1982)**



**Fig. 6 a, b Two sides of Chilkat tunic pattern board (Portland Art Museum)**





**Fig. 7 Sleaved Chilkat tunic at Portland Art Museum**



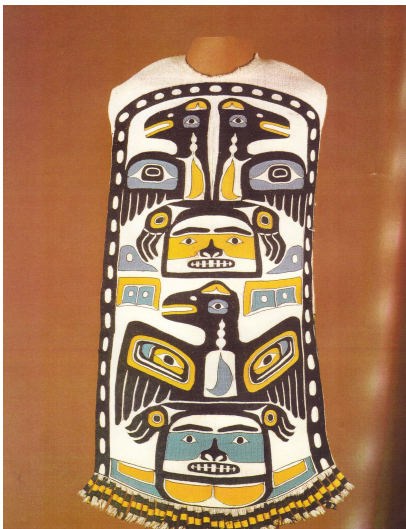
**Fig. 8 Sleaved Chilkat tunic, NMAI**



a



c

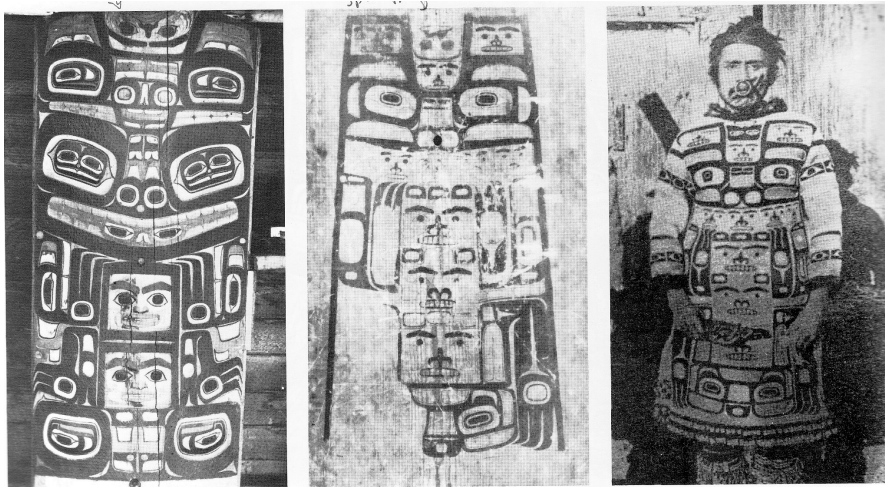


b

Fig. 9 a, b, c Two Door House Tunics a) University of Pennsylvania b) Portland Art Museum c) Denver Art Museum



**Fig. 10 Two Door House Tunic? at Bonham's and Butterfield's Auction House, San Francisco, March 2007**



**Fig. 11 Example from Cheryl Samuel (1982) of relationship between house post boards and Chilkat tunic design**





**Fig. 12 Naanyaayi house post (1982 replica)**



Alaska State Library - Historical Collections

**Fig. 13 Whale House, Klukwan (Woodworm house post appears at left of screen)**





**Fig. 14 Multiplying Wolf tunic**



**Fig. 15 Multiplying Wolf house posts**



**Fig. 16 Face on back panel of Two Door House Tunic by Jennie Thlunaut**



**Fig. 17 “Many Faces” painted screen from Chief Shakes House (Photo: Denver Art Museum)**





**Fig. 18 Inverted “Ghost Face” on back of Chilkat tunic (Photo: AMNH)**



**Fig. 19 Two house post boards from the old Whale House, depicting possible ghost face on right (Photo: PAM)**