

The Conservation of a Woven Hat Cover

By Christine Danziger and Jim Hanson

THE COVER TO A CEREMONIAL HAT of the Haida Indians, of British Columbia, has been partially restored through the efforts of a Department of Anthropology volunteer in conservation. Shauna Clark has stabilized and restored the weave of the cover for exhibition in the "Basketry of the Northwest Coast Indians" exhibit in Hall 27.

Both the hat and the cover were collected for the Museum in 1901. The hat itself is woven of light brown spruce root and decorated with the figure of a Wasco, a Haida mythological creature, in red and black. The hat cover is done in a mat weave of soft bast, or inner bark, probably of cedar. The chestnut brown of the cover is considerably darker than that of any other specimen of this material in the Museum's collection, probably because it was dyed.

Unlike the hat, which had been on exhibit in Hall 10, the damaged cover was in storage for many years. When it was removed in preparation for the current basketry exhibit, it bore evidence of attempted restoration, in which the soft, delicate bast weave had been partially repaired with hard bamboo slivers, painted to match the color of the bast. The hard bamboo had deformed the shape of the cover and caused more breakage by forcing the warp and weft apart.

To restore the cover for exhibition, it was first cleaned and its bamboo sticks removed. The problem then was to find a material to replace the broken bast fibers. The replacement material had to be compatible with the physical and chemical properties of the bast, and be thin and pliable so as not to disturb the cover's textile structure. In accordance with the Museum's conservation policy, the material would not be applied with the idea of completely restoring missing parts, but merely to stabilize and preserve the specimen. The material would not be an exact duplication of the original fiber; thus, the portion restored could always be distinguished from the original material.

After some research, it was concluded that paper would best satisfy the restoration requirements; the material finally chosen was a wet-strength mulberry silk tissue, for this paper is pliable, extremely thin, strong, acid-free, and also receptive to paint.

The task of restoration required a craftsman skilled in weaving and textile technology, and such a person was found in Shauna Clark. She has a degree in fine arts and weaving from Illinois State University and studied for several months on a fellowship under Yoshi Takahashi, a noted Japanese watercolorist.

Over a period of many weeks, she cut strips of tissue of precisely the right dimension and painstakingly painted them, using watercolors that matched the dark brown of the hat cover. The strips were folded in half, to match the width of the original fibers, threaded through a blunt-end needle, and then run into the weave of the cover to replace the missing fibers.

The time-consuming task demanded the technical skill of a textile expert, the aesthetic sensibility of an artist, and the patience of an experienced craftsman; and it was essential that the restoration be effected in such a manner that the artifact not be remade or altered in any way. The results of Shauna Clark's work are now permanently visible in this exquisitely restored piece.

*Volunteer Shauna Clark
with Haida hat and hat cover*



Fleur Hales

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