Hunting bow
Southern Northwest Coast, probably Kwakwaka'wakw, c. 1800-1840
Wood (Pacific yew or Yellow cedar root), sinew/twisted deer hide (or gut) bowstring
31" Long

Nearly all North American Native Peoples made bows and arrows for hunting and warfare, and the people of the Northwest Coast were no exception. Bow styles and appearances differed little from the northern part of the coast to the southern region, and therefore firm attributions are often difficult without some form of historical documentation accompanying the object. In some cases, particular designs or motifs may be present that help to indicate a bow's origin, and rarely some painted detail may also assist in pinpointing a source. Otherwise, the types of carved forms and details of the bow's inherent design are all one has to go on in determining a tribe or group of origin.

This particular bow has been identified at different times in its history as Eskimo, Nuu-chah-nulth (or Nootkan), and as possibly Kwakwaka'wakw (or Kwakiutl). It was first documented in Great Britain, as part of the W. O. Oldman collection, in a catalog produced in December 1904, where it was identified as #52 in a group photo and catalogued as no. 6916, "Bow, wood, strung gut, Eskimo". It later entered into the holdings of James Hooper, also an English collector, where it was catalogued as #1514. The Hooper collection was dispersed at auction in the late 1970s. In 1997, it was part of the Adelaide deMenil collection, at which time it was offered in a Sotheby's New York sale as Lot #207, identified as "probably Nuu-chah-nulth" .

A similarity has been noted between this bow and two that were described in Artificial Curiosities from the Northwest Coast of America, by J. C. H. King (see page 86, 87), which features objects collected on the Cook voyage of 1778. The two bows discussed in that volume exhibit many similarities to the subject bow, suggesting that northwestern Vancouver Island, home of the Kwakwaka'wakw, may have been the place of its origin. That publication includes a paraphrase of George Hunt's short description of the appearance and historical development of bows among the Kwakiutl. The full quotation appears below, words in brackets added:

"The bowstring is made of twisted deer-skin or bear gut. In olden times all bows had turned tips, but in later times straight flat bows were much used. These were originally characteristic of the tribes on the west coast of Vancouver Island [the Nuu-chah-nulth], whose bows are narrow at the tips and wide in the middle, while the Kwakiutl bow has a round grip and is wide and flat near each end. The back is sometimes slightly keeled. The bows of the

west coast [of Vancouver Island] sometimes have a number of ribs all along the belly, while those of the Kwakiutl are smooth."
Franz Boas/George Hunt, The Jesup North Pacific Expedition, Volume V, The Kwakiutl of Vancouver Island. American Museum of Natural History, E. J. Brill, Leiden, published 1909. (pages 512-513).

Clearly this bow better fits the description of the Kwakwaka'wakw bows given by Hunt than the brief description and other well known characteristics of the bows of the Nuu-chah-nulth. Hunt also indicates that 'in later times' the Kwakwaka'wakw adopted the style of bow made by the Nuu-chah-nulth. King interprets this to mean in the nineteenth century, but just when in the nineteenth century this change took place and why is not known. Presumably such a sea-change in technology would have come on the heels of other major historical and cultural changes that came upon the Kwakwaka'wakw in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Once the traditional enemy of the Kwakwaka'wakw, by the late nineteenth century the Nuu-chah-nulth had become entwined with their neighbors across the mountains through the interaction of marriages between noble families, which transferred hereditary names and dance privileges between the two groups. It is conceivable that ideas of a technological nature may have made the leap across Vancouver Island during the evolution of these developments as well.

The physical characteristics of this bow and the details of its form suggest that although it appears to have considerable age, it is not likely as old as the late eighteenth-century examples described among the Cook materials. In the absence of clear indications of greater age, it may be most appropriate to attribute this bow to the first decades of the nineteenth century. Prior to this time, there does not appear to be any apparent reason why the Kwakwaka'wakw would cease the production of their traditional form of bow in favor of the type made by the Nuu-chah-nulth. It is likely that the switch from one type to the other took place within the nineteenth century, a time of innumerable changes and new developments in the lives of British Columbia native peoples, in both technological and socio-cultural realms.

Another description recorded by Hunt in the 1909 publication covers the techniques and materials for the making of such a bow:

"Bending is also used for shaping the bow, which is made of the root of the yellow cedar. A straight piece of root is cut out, the end of which is heated by the fire. Then it is rubbed with mountain-goat or deer tallow, which is first held in the mouth. The tallow melts on the hot stick [the bow], which is thoroughly soaked with it. Then the end of the cedar-root is put into the crack of a drift-log, and the weight of the root is allowed to bend over the end [of the bow]." (page 331).

Though Hunt documents the use of yellow cedar root in Kwakwaka'wakw bows, Pacific yew is perhaps the most common variety of wood that is employed in bowmaking, not only on the Northwest Coast but in other parts of the world where it or related species are found. Most Nuu-chah-nulth bows appear to have been made from yew, and it was also the favored wood for canoe paddles not only among the Nuu-chah-nulth, but it was also commonly used for paddles by the Kwakwaka'wakw. The springiness of yew, a characteristic naturally favored in bows, is also a great enhancement in a canoe paddle, where it adds a noticeable increase in drive at the end of every stroke. Yew is a denser, heavier wood than yellow cedar, and probably more so than yellow cedar root as well. It has a deep, reddish brown color in the heartwood and a pale ivory color in the outermost rings known as the sapwood. Without handling this bow, it would be impossible to know for sure whether it was made from yew or yellow cedar root, as the patina of age tends to obscure the true color and figure of the wood. Regardless of which wood was employed in creating this bow, the care and expertise shown by its maker are apparent in its subtle forms and graceful curves.

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