

# SHUKÁ HÍT: OUR ANCESTORS' HOUSE

WELCOME TO SHUKÁ HÍT, OUR ANCESTORS' HOUSE. Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian families lived in traditional clan houses like this before they moved into single family homes in the late 1800s. We use this room as an educational and ceremonial space.

## CLAN CRESTS

Each clan claims several crests which represent animals and other non-human beings associated with the history of the clan or the death of a clan ancestor.

Crests were acquired by clan ancestors in the distant past as a result of a supernatural encounter with an animal or another being from which the crest is derived. They embody the spirits of the clan ancestors involved in the original event, and the spirits of the clan ancestors through which they have been passed down to the present generation. Crests, which are considered property, are closely guarded against use by non-clan members.

Crests are carved and painted on house posts, screens and sometimes house fronts. They are depicted on regalia, ceremonial objects and even utilitarian equipment. Crests are also represented in intangible forms such as in clan legends, songs, dances and personal names. Crests and crest objects are handed down within the clan.



Painted House Front, Cháat! Hít, Neix.ádi Clan, Saanyaa Kwáan, at Saxman, 1900. It was built by Chief Kashéiks. American Museum of Natural History, 243149.

In the world of the Northwest Coast people, infants are born into their mothers' moiety, clan and house. As members of a clan they are entitled to wear and use crests owned by their moiety, clan and house.

## NAMING OF THE HOUSE

Every stage of construction was celebrated by an appropriate ceremony, but the greatest ceremony occurred after the house was completed and the house was given a name.

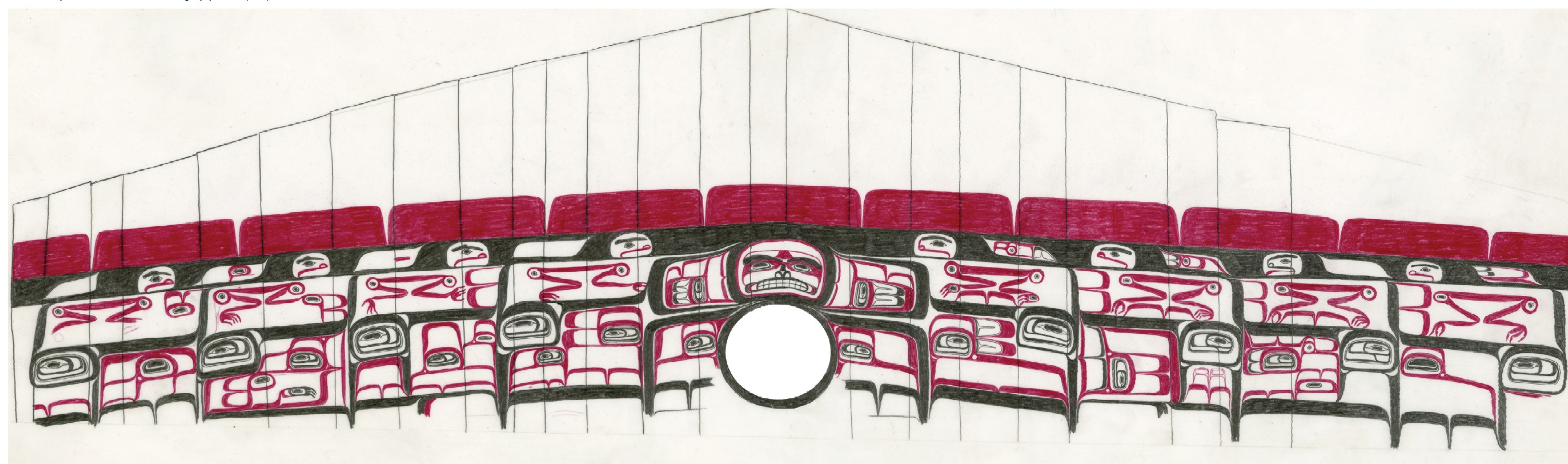
The most honored names were taken from a clan crest or an event important in the clan's history. Other names of lesser importance referred to the position of the house or a physical characteristic such as its ornamentation, appearance or form of construction.

Even though families no longer live in clan houses, clan members continue to identify themselves as descendants of a particular house.



Home of Chief Johnson with painting of killer whale crest (and totem pole erected in memory of his mother), Ketchikan, c. 1900. Alaska State Library, Case and Draper Collection, P39-829.

Painted House Front, Yanyéidi Clan House, Taku River Tlingit, Atlin, British Columbia. Rendition of Yanyéidi house front of the Taku River Tlingit, by Lyle Wilson (Haida), 1992, UBCPNOA.H11.



Interior of the famed Whale House of the Gaanaxteidi Clan of Klukwan, showing the Rain Wall house screen flanked by the Wood Worm post (left) and the Raven post (right), with clan members displaying additional clan ot.doww. Alaska State Library, Winter & Pond Collection, P87-0010.

## HOUSE FRONTS, SCREENS AND POSTS

Clans commissioned artists to paint large, complex designs depicting clan crest animals and spirits on the front of the house, house posts and interior screens. The designs represented important events in a clan's history and identity.



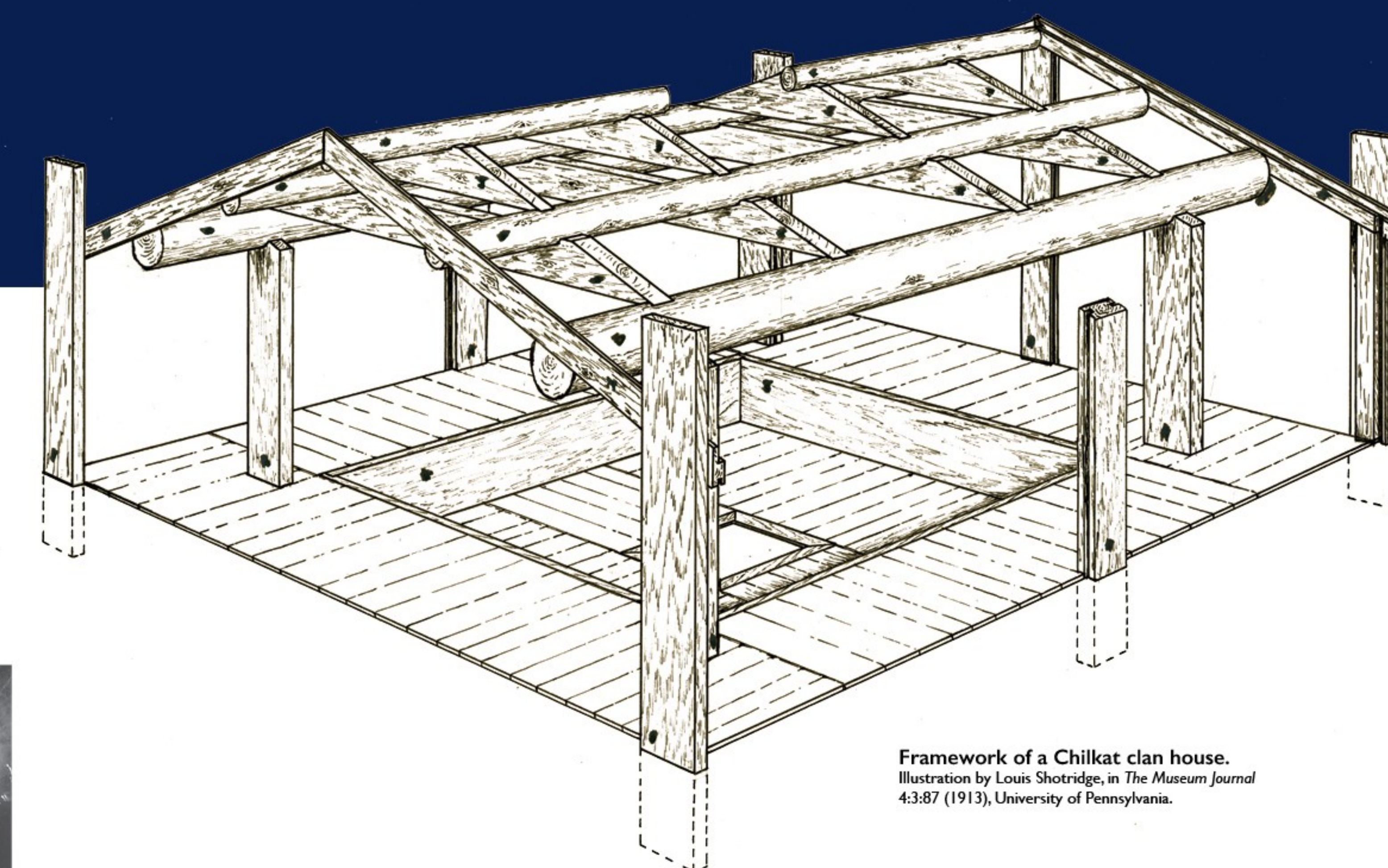
Drawing of painted screen and house posts of the Kaagwaantaan Clan, Klukwan. The screen depicts Grizzly Bear; the left post represents Wolf with Pups; the post on the right portrays Bear and Cubs. Illustration by Louis Shotridge, in The Museum Journal 4:3-90 (1913), University of Pennsylvania.

*"The screens and the carved poles inside our houses were handed down to us by our ancestors who had owned them. They are sacred to us and we hold them in deep feelings. They are our ties with the people who came before us."*

— Mildred Sparks, Gaanaxteidi Clan, Klukwan



Beaver House screen, Deisheetaan Clan, Angoon. University of Pennsylvania, NA9499.



Framework of a Chilkat clan house. Illustration by Louis Shotridge, in The Museum Journal 4:3-87 (1913), University of Pennsylvania.

## BUILDING A CLAN HOUSE

Building a clan house was one of the most important social and religious events in the life of the Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian people. Members of the opposite clan or moiety were commissioned to build the clan house. For example, if the clan commissioning the construction was Eagle, Ravens would be retained to build the house.

Clans built monumental structures, comfortable and snug against the extreme weather, using only their stone tools and the trees in the rainforest. The heavy timbers and planks were carefully united through groove, mortise and tenon to support each other without extraneous fastenings.

Spruce and hemlock trees, and sometimes red cedar, were used to build clan houses. Spruce trees were used for the framework, while hemlock (which splits better but is not as strong) was made into boards and planks. The builders chose straight tall trees without knots for the roof beams. Trees were felled by controlled burning and adzing; sometimes a stone chisel, wedge and maul were used. After felling, they were stripped of bark and chipped to proper thickness by hand with a stone adze. Two large beams, two medium beams, and one ridge beam were all made in the same way.

The corner posts and side posts were split with wedges from logs pre-cut to the proper length, and then smoothed with the adze. Grooves were cut with the adze to hold the planks forming the walls. Plank makers split the great planks that formed the walls from straight-grained hemlock logs to desired thicknesses by means of wedges, spreading sticks and crossbars, driven with stone hammers.



Sketch showing the manufacturing of boards and planks. Illustration by Louis Shotridge, in The Museum Journal 4:3-90 (1913), University of Pennsylvania.

Measurements for the structural elements were made by the thickness of the fingers, the span of the hand and the joints of the arms. House builders used cedar-bark rope to measure out floor plans and ensure a true rectangle by checking distances between points. They also used rope made from cedar bark or spruce roots to raise roof beams and rafters.

The roof was covered with split shingles, and heavy planks covered the upper two platforms in the interior. Heavy retaining timbers formed the walls supporting the platforms, which were interlocked at the ends. The doorway was oval and low, and was reached by several steps which cleared the average snow level in winter. The raised doorway also served to deter warriors who might attempt to enter the house.

*"It was itself a means of defense, since one stooping to enter was in no position to attack or to defend himself. The door was heavily built and could be barred from the inside."*

— Lt. George T. Emmons, Ethnographer

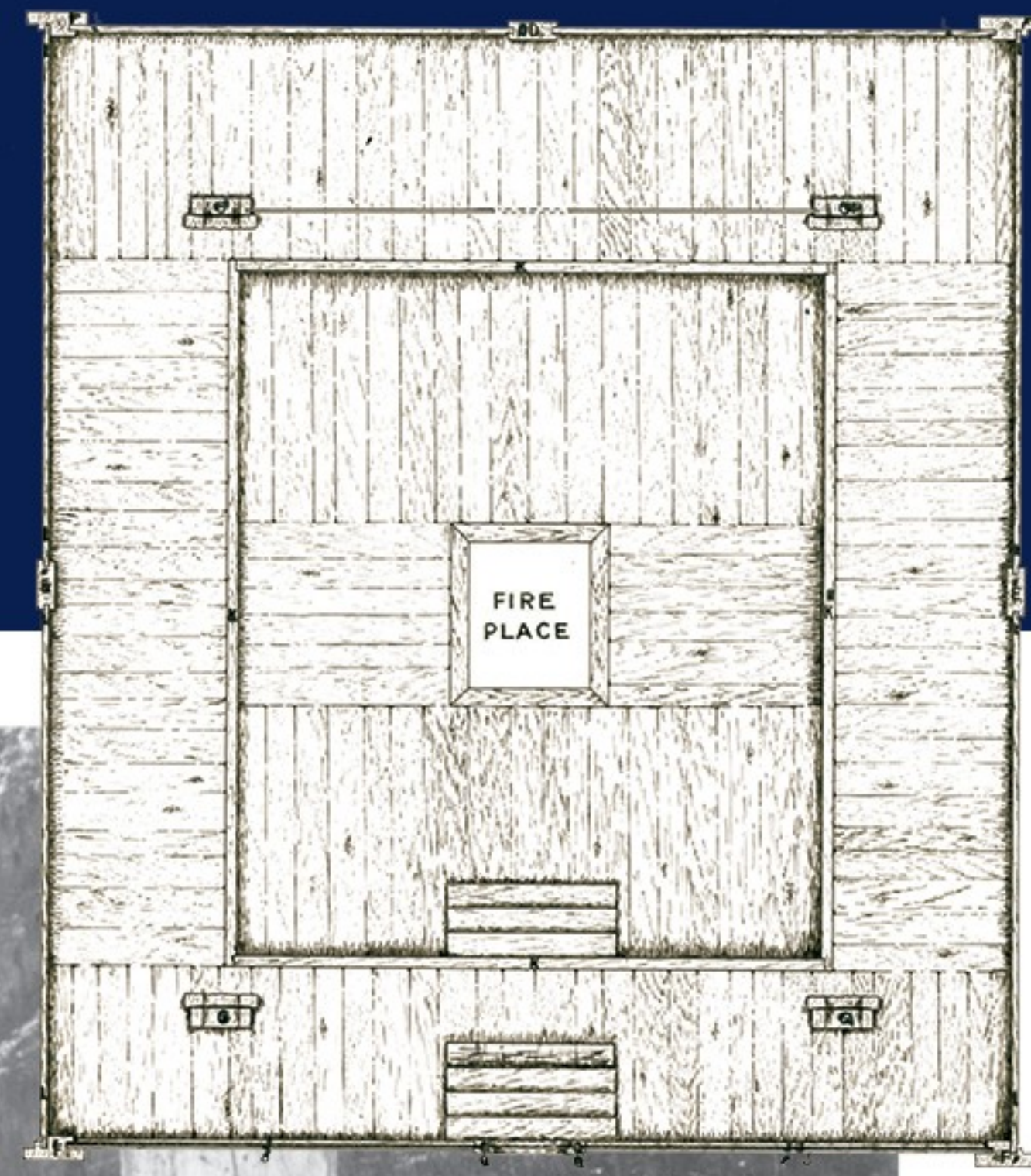
## CONTINUATION OF A TRADITION

By 1890, Tlingit clans were constructing wood frame houses with windows, but continued the practice of painting the house fronts. These houses had a single large room on the ground floor, similar to the large open space in traditional clan houses. In the 1940s, Chief Shakes of the Naanyaa.aayí Clan collaborated with the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) to reconstruct the original Chief Shakes Clan House in Wrangell, as a means of preserving the original tradition of clan house construction. This house was restored in 2013.

In recent years, there have been other renovations and restorations of clan houses throughout the region, including the restoration of a Haida clan house in Kasaaan.

First built in 1880, the Haida Chief Son-I-Hat's Whale House in Kasaaan was rebuilt over three years by refurbishing salvageable parts of the historic building and replacing the rest with traditional methods and materials. The Whale House was rededicated in September 2016. Courtesy of Seababe.





Floorplan of a Chilkat clan house. Illustration by Louis Shotridge, in *The Museum Journal* 4:3:87 (1913), University of Pennsylvania.



Exterior of Chief Shotridge's House, Klukwan, Alaska. c. 1895. Alaska State Libraries, ASL-P87-0009

# LIVING IN A CLAN HOUSE

THE INSIDE OF THE HOUSE WAS DESIGNED WITH THREE LEVELS OF LIVING SPACE. On the lowest level was a central fire for cooking and heating. An opening in the center of the roof drew smoke up and away from the living and sleeping areas. The second level, the living area, was below ground level by several feet, and was where people worked and socialized. They slept on raised platforms near the walls on the third level, and kept warm by using fur robes as covers. The clan house was dry, warm and comfortable.

The living and sleeping areas were divided into separate, semi-private spaces (apartments) for each family. The position of the sleeping quarters reflected the social standing of residents within the hierarchy of the household. The house leader, *hit s'aati*, had his quarters behind the house screen, entered by a hole in the center, where he lived with his immediate family. Higher ranked families lived closest to the screen, while poor relatives and slaves slept nearest the door.

*"The spaces were separated from one another by walls of chests, blankets and bundles containing the family wealth in skins, blankets, clothing, ceremonial paraphernalia, and food products. On the walls were hung weapons, traps, snares, and hunting gear. Cedar-bark mats covered the floor over which was laid the bedding consisting of pelts of the caribou, mountain sheep, goat, and bear, and blankets of lynx, fox, and squirrel, which in the daytime were ordinarily rolled up for economy of space."*

– Lt. George T. Emmons, Ethnographer

Haida village with totem poles and canoes, Howkan village, Long Island, Alaska, ca. 1888. Clan houses were built along the shore in sheltered coves. Photo courtesy of the University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections. NA2520



Interior of a clan house, Klukwan, Alaska, 1894. Photo courtesy of the University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections, NA3080

## WHO LIVED TOGETHER IN A CLAN HOUSE?

Residents of the clan house were closely related families living together under one roof. The men of the house were brothers, maternal nephews and grand-nephews, all related through their mothers and belonging to the same clan. Their wives and children belonged to other clans in the opposite moiety. Slaves also lived in the house.

The children of the house belonged to their mother's clan. Boys would leave the house at 10–12 years old and go to live with their maternal uncles by whom they would be educated and trained. Similarly, a man's sisters' sons would come to live in their mother's clan house to be raised into adulthood by their maternal uncles.

Daughters would remain in the house with their mothers until they married, after which they would go to live with their husbands in their respective clan houses. After the death of her husband, the widow of a clan leader would return to her own clan house if no one in her husband's clan came forward to marry her.

## THE HOUSE AS AN ECONOMIC UNIT

The residents of a clan house comprised a significant economic unit within the clan, and they were also a self-supporting unit in the economy of everyday life in the village.

The clan owned the major forms of property including land and the resources of the land and water, but house leaders, *hit s'aati*, often exercised authority over particular salmon streams, berry-picking areas and hunting and trading activities. He directed when harvests would begin and for how long the activity would continue, and ensured that social and spiritual balance was maintained between humans and the living beings that were taken for food by house members. This role served an ecological function and complied with the core cultural value of *Haa Shuká* by ensuring the sustainability of resources for future generations. The younger men were also expected to provide material support to the house and clan leaders through contributions of food and materials needed for ceremonial activities.

*"The house is everything. The house is more important than the people who live in it."*

– A Tlingit Elder  
L'uknaxádi Clan, Sitka, 1990



Natives of Yakutat, S.W. Alaska. Alaska State Libraries, ASL-P27-056

# CEREMONIES IN THE CLAN HOUSE

IN THE PAST, THE CLAN HOUSE WAS THE SETTING FOR CEREMONIES THAT PUNCTUATE THE LIVES OF THE TLINGIT, HAIDA AND TSIMSHIAN PEOPLE. At feasts and ceremonial occasions, all clan members would assist the household and clan, including the women who had married into other clan houses. All the men and women of the clan would assist their clan leader, *sháade háni*, in preparations for the occasion. The ceremonies involved songs and dances, performances on musical instruments, displays of ceremonial regalia and great feasts. Ceremonies might include house building, naming and dedication; memorials to those who had died; and marriages. Today, ceremonies are held in clan houses and community halls.

## HOUSE-BUILDING CEREMONIES

Southeast Alaska Natives believe that trees have spirits. In their thousands of years of occupying Southeast Alaska, they developed ceremonies to give thanks to the Spirits of the Trees for the use and benefits trees provide to humans.

House building began with the builder making speeches to opposite clans in the village to enlist their aid in the enterprise. Offerings were made to the Tree People before trees were cut down. Then the trees were towed by canoe to the house site, and that night the builder hosted a feast for the workers called “Feeding the Trees.” In this ceremony, the spirits of the Tree People were believed to receive the benefits of the food and gifts that were distributed to the workers. The preparation of the logs began on the following day.



Sealaska Tree Ceremony, 2007. Photo courtesy of Sealaska.

Sealaska has continued this ancient tradition and performs a Tree Ceremony at the beginning of each harvest season. In the image above, board member Jacqueline Pata spreads down on a blanket placed on the ground to protect and give comfort to the spirit of the tree as it is felled.

## HOUSE DEDICATION

When the house was completed, a dedication ceremony lasting several days was held, into which the clans from the opposite moiety were invited. Often this ceremony was the final memorial in a series of funerary rituals honoring the memory of a clan ancestor. The largest ceremonies occurred when opposite clans from distant villages participated. Several days were devoted to long and elaborate ceremonies involving singing, dancing, oratory, the display of valuable clan objects, great feasting and competitions. On the final day, much property was distributed to the guests, particularly to those who assisted in the construction of the house, given in memory of clan ancestors whose names were called out loud with each bestowal.



Dedication of Chief Shakes House, Wrangell, Alaska, 1940. Sealaska Heritage Institute, Linn A. Forrest Photograph Collection, SHI-P14-51.



Visitors Attending Potlatch at Kaatx'waaltú Village, Chilkat River, Alaska. c. 1895. Photo by Winter & Pond, courtesy of the Alaska State Library, ASL-P87-0048

## MEMORIAL CEREMONIES FOLLOWING THE DEATH OF A CLAN MEMBER

Clan houses were the site of the cycle of ceremonies performed after the death of a clan member. The funeral took place immediately following the death of an individual, and involved a smoking ceremony, an all-night vigil, a funeral ceremony during which the deceased was laid in state in the most honored position in the clan house in front of the house screen and a feast. Members of opposite clans provided the assistance needed by the mourning clan, including tending to the deceased, as well as providing food for the funeral feast. Most importantly, the opposite clans brought out their *at.óowu* (clan-owned ceremonial objects) and provided words of support and condolence through oratory intended to comfort and heal the bereaved clan.

The *ku.éex'*, or memorial potlatch, was, and remains today, the culminating ceremony and final expression of grief in the cycle of funerary rituals that is conducted in the clan house. This is usually a large-scale ceremony involving clans from multiple villages. In the past, ceremonies continued for several days and nights. During the *ku.éex'*, honor and respect are shown to the deceased through the display of clan *at.óowu* and the

distribution of food and gifts to the opposite moiety. Of much greater importance is the honor and respect expressed towards the clan ancestors, whose names are called out and are believed to receive the benefits of the food and gifts that are received by the guests. Such distributions constitute formal and public payment to the opposite side for services performed in connection with the death.

Following the performance of mourning songs and expressions of grief and condolence by opposite clans, the ceremony is then transformed into a celebration, marked by feasting, the distribution of gifts and money, the telling of jokes and other entertainments. If the *ku.éex'* is held in memory of the death of the clan or house leader, the new incumbent is announced and validated by the group in attendance. Before the end of the ceremony, the host clan makes a large distribution of money to the guests in honor of deceased clan ancestors and as payment for the ceremonial service they had provided during the host clan's time of grief. Through the ceremonial activities conducted in the *ku.éex'*, social and spiritual balance is restored between the clans of opposite moieties and with the ancestral spirits.



Shangukeidi Clan Leaders distributing fruit to guests from the opposite moiety during a recent *ku.éex'* in Klukwan, 2013.



Members of Raven Clans acknowledging distribution of fruit from the host clan during a recent *ku.éex'* in Klukwan, 2013.



Members of the Shangukeidi Clan standing in front of their clan house, Kaawdliyaayi Hit, to greet invited guests at the start of a *ku.éex'*, Klukwan, 2013.

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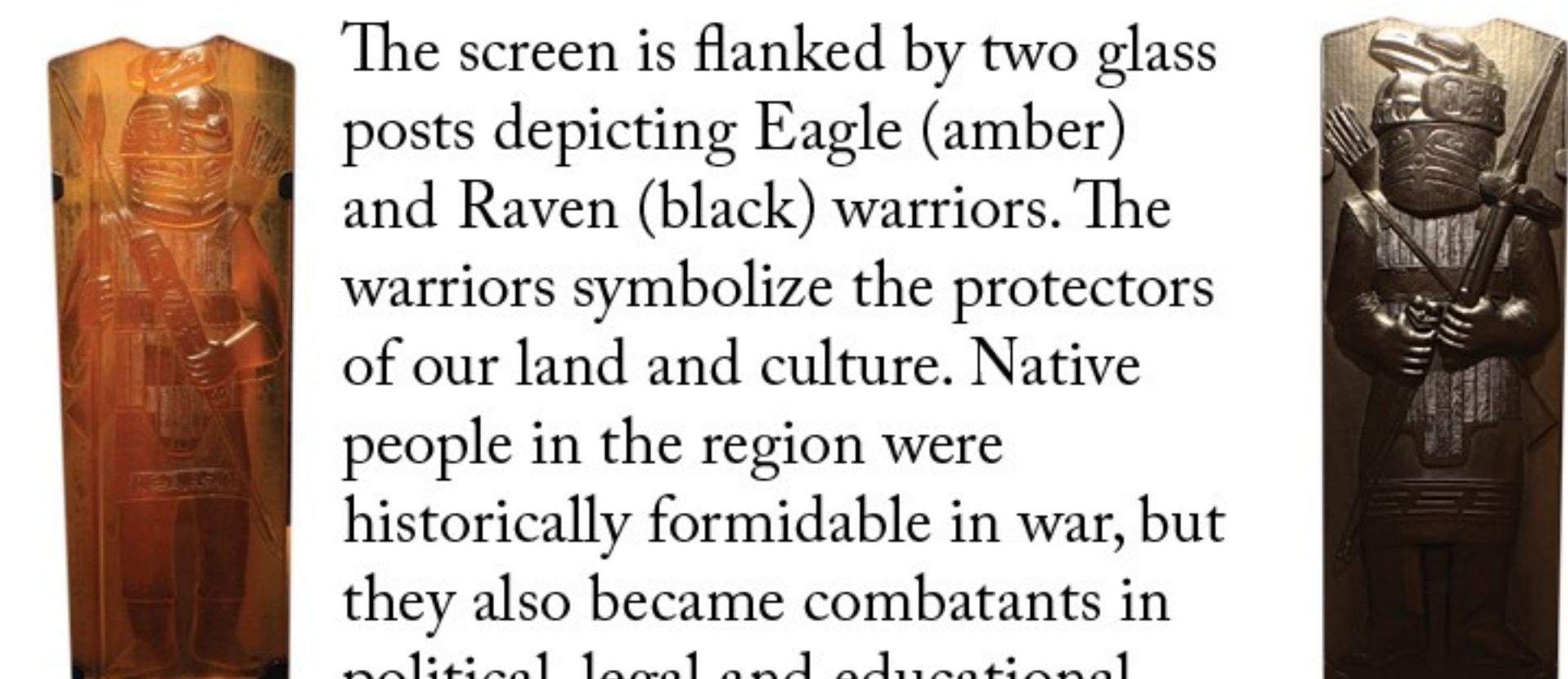
THIS CLAN HOUSE IS MODELLED AFTER THE TRADITIONAL CLAN HOUSES HISTORICALLY SEEN THROUGHOUT SOUTHEAST ALASKA. It features three levels for communal activities, such as lectures, special events and educational programs. The clan house was named Shuká Hít during the grand opening ceremony in May 2015, reflecting the bonds with our ancestors and with our present and future generations. Shuká Hít is translated as “Our Ancestors’ House.”



Eagle and Raven clans participate in the Shuká Hít dedication to ensure social and spiritual balance, 2015.

## HOUSE SCREEN AND POSTS

This clan house features a one-of-a-kind glass house screen and two house posts made by Tlingit artist Preston Singletary. Singletary's piece is the largest glass screen in the world, measuring 17 feet wide and 12 feet high.



The screen is flanked by two glass posts depicting Eagle (amber) and Raven (black) warriors. The warriors symbolize the protectors of our land and culture. Native people in the region were historically formidable in war, but they also became combatants in political, legal and educational battles, where they fought for land claims and civil rights throughout the 20th century.



Preston Singletary discusses the installation of the glass house screen in Shuká Hít.

Singletary's installation was supported in part by an ArtPlace America grant, which included funds for apprentices to help create and install the screen and posts. The mentor-apprentice approach was historically integral to Northwest Coast art, as it was the way knowledge was passed down through generations. This is a practice and tradition which is continued in Sealaska Heritage programs today.



David A. Boxley works on the installation of the house front for Shuká Hít.

## HOUSE FRONT

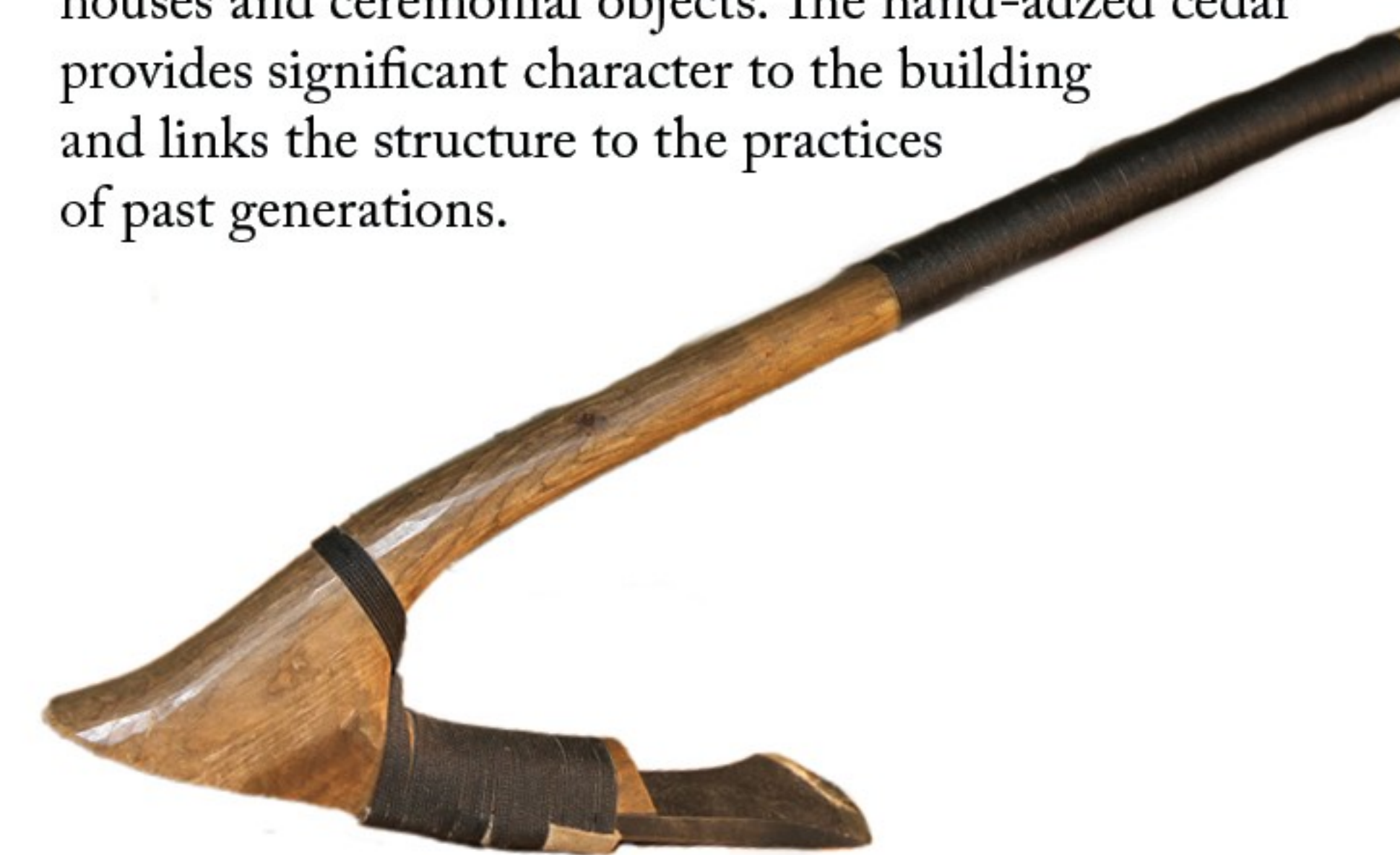
The house front is by Tsimshian artist David A. Boxley, an internationally recognized master artist. At almost 40 feet wide by 15 feet high, Boxley's piece, which he made with his son, David R. Boxley, is thought to be the largest carved-and-painted Tsimshian house front in the world. The center design was inspired by the style and complexity of old Tsimshian house fronts and tells the story of *Am'ala: 'Niit, gu in man sinyaagwa ha'lidzox* (Am'ala: He Who Holds up the Earth). The four Tsimshian crests are depicted on the side panels.



Wayne Price adzing a panel during the construction of the Walter Soboleff Building.

## ADZE WORK

The cedar planks and posts in this clan house were hand-adzed by Tlingit master artist Wayne Price. He adzed almost every day for five months and at the end of the project he made nearly one million adze marks on more than 3,200 square feet of wood throughout the building, most of which are in this house. Adzing produces a texture that is commonly seen in Northwest Coast art, canoes, clan houses and ceremonial objects. The hand-adzed cedar provides significant character to the building and links the structure to the practices of past generations.



Marking a corner post in Shuká Hít according to an ancient practice.

## HAND PRINT

Do you see a red hand print in the far corner of this clan house? During construction, special marks were placed in the corners of clan houses. The mark may be an “X” or, as is the case here, a carved hand print.

In the past, the wealthiest clans owned numerous slaves, and a slave was often sacrificed during house construction. The killing of slaves was a mark of wealth and a sacrifice of property that greatly added to the prestige of the builder. The red color of this mark signifies the blood of slaves that were sacrificed to give high value to a house in times past.

The Sealaska Heritage Council of Traditional Scholars selected Alaska State Senator Albert Kookesh, Teikweidi Clan, a significant leader among Alaska Natives, to have his hand print carved into the corner of this house. He put all the names of his 15 grandchildren and great-grandchildren into a bowl to select whose hand would be imprinted in red paint within his carved hand. This practice embodies a cultural value (*Haa Shuká*) uniting current and future generations with our ancestors.

## CULTURAL EVENTS AND EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS

Shuká Hít embodies SHI's goal to promote cultural diversity and cross-cultural understanding by providing a space for cultural presentations, performances, educational programs and special events. These programs serve to enhance and sustain Alaska Native languages, arts, culture and history, and contribute to public understanding and appreciation of Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian cultures. Below are images of various programs and events held in our clan house.



Clockwise from left: 1) SHI President Dr. Roita Kaahini Worl (Shangukeidi Clan) addresses a panel of Alaska Native veterans during a SHI lecture series, November 2016. 2) Students exit Shuká Hít during a visit to the Walter Soboleff Building. 3) Alison Marks (K'ineix Kwáan Clan) models a Chilkat shawl by Kwagwalth and Squamish designer Pam Baker, Fashion Show at Celebration 2016. 4) David Katzeek, Shangukeidi, Shóode Háni (Clan Leader), tells a legend at a Baby Raven Reads event. 5) Lily Hope (T'akdeintaan Clan) presents a story during an Any Given Child school event, November 2015.