Dorothy Grant (Haida tribe)

Artist Timeline

1950
1985
2014

Biography

Dorothy Grant is known throughout the Pacific Northwest for her contemporary fashions that evoke the spirit of traditional Haida design. Before she began her fashion lines, she created exceptional button blankets. Grant’s Kaigani Haida of the Raven Clan, was born in Hydaburg, Alaska, on March 14, 1955, and raised in Ketchikan. Florence Edenshaw Davidson was an elder in the Haida community and a master artist and carver of the Eagle Clan, known as Guud San Glass “Eagle of the Dawn,” who influenced Grant’s creativity. She taught her young apprentice how to appliqué ceremonial robes as well as how to make spruce root baskets and hats in Masset, British Columbia.

Around 1977 while at a community college in Seattle, Grant designed her first button blanket for a school project. Before long, Grant began experimenting with the traditional button blanket design with the help of her creative partner, Robert Davidson (grandson of Florence Edenshaw Davidson). Together, their traditional button blankets were created with a male-female or husband-wife partnership; he would create the appliqué design and she would sew it together with decorative elements. After creating several blankets, Grant enrolled in the Helen Le Feaux School of Fashion Design in Vancouver to create more wearable designs, and she completed her formal education in 1988. While creating button blankets for her community, Grant also created a fashion line of ceremonial wear. She named them Feastwear and Red Raven—both lines have male and female designs.

While her creative partner Davidson initially created the designs for Grant’s button blankets and Feastwear line for two decades, she eventually broke away and began to create the designs herself. She recently closed her shop in Vancouver and now creates and sells her artwork exclusively online. Many of her blankets and fashions can be seen in museums and galleries throughout the United States and Canada.

Potlatch and Button Blankets

The gift-giving feast potlatch is probably one of the most important ceremonies for the Northwest Coast’s First Nations community as well as the reason for the design and creation of button blankets. A potlatch is an essential part of the social, economic, and political structure of the Haida Nation with the button blanket signifying lineage, rank, history, and oral tradition in the object form. The essence of a potlatch is of generosity: donations and giveaways. The potlatch was a chief’s method of validating his wealth and power by giving away as much material items and luxuries he had cached away to the guests attending the feastivity.

The potlatch was outlawed by the Canadian government in the Indian Act of 1884. The ban prohibited the Haida from ceremonies, raising totem poles and speaking their language. The Indian Act of 1884 was removed in 1951, but it would be nearly three decades until a new totem pole was raised. Button blankets themselves never faded into obscurity, but became even more essential to the community. With the entire Haida community participating in ceremonies, it became raised. Button blankets themselves never faded into obscurity, but became even more essential to the community. With the entire Haida community participating in ceremonies, it became even more essential. In order to please the people and show their respect, they made the blankets themselves.

Stylized whale rib and side profile of the folk hero and trickster, Raven. Most Haida button blankets are created in the simple color combination of red and black. Outlining the whale ribs are hundreds of mother-of-pearl buttons, seven only millimeters apart. On the Raven’s, dark blue and black beads were sewn meticulously by hand. The whale rib and Raven repeat down the center, one after the other. The Raven motif is repeated three times with the Raven’s beak pointing to the right. The abstract whale rib begins at the top of the blanket and repeats towards to the bottom four times.

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From the Permanent Collection

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Discussion Questions

1. What are the characteristics and the purpose of a button blanket?
2. Do you consider Dorothy Grant to be innovative with her art or simply reusing the traditional style? Why or why not?
3. How did the partnership of Grant & Robert Davidson work?
4. What was the impact and result of laws that specifically prohibit Native American ceremonies?
Dorothy Grant (Haida, born 1955)  
Robert Davidson (Haida, born 1946)

**Button Blanket**

1994  
Wool with mother-of-pearl buttons and glass beads  
58 x 56 in.; 147.32 x 142.24 cm  
Museum purchase  
1995.9