



# ANCESTRAL TAPESTRIES

A POWERFUL TLINGIT ART FORM

by **Michael Engelhard**

**T**LINGIT CEREMONIAL BLANKETS are made for movement. Fringes a foot long or longer cascade from the garment caping shoulders, swaying hypnotically as the wearer dips and twirls to the throbbing of drums. Eyes stare from the cloth, as many as behold the dancer's grace. It's an honor, displaying your house's history thus, a privilege once of nobility. Such robes mark special events—public feasts and potlatches where they're presented to high-ranking guests or wrap a body lying in state. The regalia, trimmed with fur, hooves, puffin beaks, brass thimbles, or tinkly .22 casings include leggings, tunics, and purses.

This textile art, among the most complex in North America, is the yin to male totem pole carving's yang. By manufacturing beauty,

**Above:** Chilkat blanket being woven by Lily Hope. Some of the warps have been tied and weighted to keep the weave tight.

weavers—today sometimes men—honor their ancestors and instruct youngsters. The skills bracket six generations in certain families. For Lily Hope, a Juneau practitioner, “A woman who maintains the continuity of weaving values the way of life...” “We’re still here,” she adds, with robes paraded as splendid proof. By 1907, 15 Tlingit weavers remained and then a single one, Jennie Thlunaut of Klukwan, who at 93 revived the craft in the mid-1980s two-handedly.

According to legend, Tsimshians near present-day Wrangell invented weaving when a snowbound, feverish, starving maiden copied her clan house's painted wood-screen partition, composing the first dance apron on a crude frame.

Her materials and method endured. Fibers from five to seven mountain goats, “drafted” off a pile, rolled between palm



**Left:** *Diving Whale Lovebirds*, a Chilkat robe by Clarissa Rizal, is being danced.

on bentwood boxes and boards, which women then deftly translated; nowadays, many conceive their own. Taboos, fasting, and abstinence governed the weaving, a kind of meditation. “You enter a sacred space,” a place of healing, Hope’s sister Ursala Hudson says. Traditionally, a finished robe was—and on occasion is—danced before its buyer, severed from the frame and released in a Cutting of the Robe ceremony. Hope compares the process to pregnancy and delivery. “I can let this go with joy,” she feels when giving a blanket away. Chilkat taught her late mother, the multi-talented mentor Clarissa Rizal, “the art of patience, the way of gratitude, and the act of compassion.”

Chilkat designs, stylized but representational clan crests and oral history figures, broadcast the wearer’s kin-group, his or her social identity. No other weaving manages perfect circles—braided twining allows raising round and curvy contours—and Chilkat eyes often fill panel segments joined by black “formlines.” Humanoid faces embody animal spirits. Lore regarding the robes’ origin states that, long ago, pelts cloaking animals living like people hid potent personalities. Chilkat heraldic creatures look flayed, butterflyed and flattened. Cubist scrums squirm with paws, claws, tails, beaks, mouths, fins, and fangs. Yellow and black border bands contain but can’t ever tame this mythic menagerie.

Its powers linger, imbuing humans. “We’re selective who we teach that [Chilkat technique] to,” Lily Hope says. “We want to be careful into whose hands that is put.” Ancestral tapestries, transcending such reservations and ethnic or political blocs, bond Northwest Coast lives in delight. ♡

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*Michael Engelhard eagerly anticipates The Gathering of the Robes, the largest Chilkat and Ravenstail blanket dancing in a century. Canceled in 2020, it is scheduled for next June in Juneau.*

and thigh, yield a strand. Two torqued together become horizontal filling or “weft,” the five-sided fabric’s bulk. Pounded cedar bark plied with two strands makes “warp,” stronger, supportive threads dangling from an upright loom’s crossbar. The loom lacks mechanical parts, resulting in broadcloths worked top to bottom, fingers flying like those of a harp player.

Ravenstail, an older, black-and-white, rather mathematical style, draws on basketry and nature imagery, lightning and spider webs. A dozen different manual moves grow designs suggesting op art or circuit board filigree. Weaving Ravenstail “makes your brain hurt, sometimes,” Hope says. Just eleven pre-WWI examples survive, a few merely as swatches. Until three weavers recreated the Sitka chief Kotlean’s blanket after seven-year, painstaking research, no Ravenstail in motion had been seen in 200.

Industrial dyes and merino made inroads. The weaver-naturalist Teri Rofkar meshed in Kevlar and fiber optics. Her *Lituya Bay Robe* commemorates the 1958 earthquake and tsunami, her *DNA Robe* Baranof Island’s mountain goats, thriving for 20 millennia there. Gathering and mixing natural and artificial ingredients, Rofkar joined present to past and future, Tlingit society’s weft and warp.

Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian artisans since the 1820s also have fashioned *naaxiin*, “fringe about the body,” the classic named after Tlingits settling a fjord near present-day Haines: Chilkat. Before guns arrived in that country, only inland caribou hides and copper rivaled these blankets in value. Museums and private collectors pay up to \$73,000 for top pieces, admiring a weave’s striking tightness, subtle yet impactful textural shifts, and the limited color palette’s rhythms—lemon yellow, blue-green, robin-egg blue—overlying goat’s natural ivory or “fluffy vanilla.” Formerly, copper, hemlock bark, and “wolf moss” lichen served to hand-dye yarn. Spinning the thousand yards needed takes six weeks and the weaving one full-time year. Men built the looms and painted patterns