

# A Vase of Great Significance

By René Villeneuve



The National Gallery of Canada has recently acquired the Ptarmigan Vase, the most important example of mokume work in Canada, remarkable both for its size and for the complexity and quality of its decoration. A true masterpiece, the vase — currently installed on the balcony of the Great Hall — was created at the dawn of the 20th century in one of the Western world’s most famous workshops.

The object was the brainchild of George Paulding Farnham, then a designer at Tiffany & Co., creators of fine jewellery and objets d’art. When he conceived the piece, Farnham already had interests in British Columbia’s mining industry. In creating the vase, which was a personal project, he mobilized the talents of some of the New York firm’s finest craftsmen. Their names — most unusually — appear on its underside.

The Japanese process of mokume involves the lamination of different metals into sheets that are then worked to produce a veined surface resembling wood grain. Once the contrasting coloured metals (in this case copper and silver) have been fused, a pattern is created by tretching, hammering, cutting, and chasing the heets so that the different layers become visible. The mokume is enhanced by the application of acid, which creates a rough finish. The vibrant surface of the Ptarmigan Vase results from the bonding of between 15 and 20 layers of metal probably extracted from Farnham's mines. This extremely refined Oriental technique has been used to create a piece whose form and ornamentation are rich in meaning.

The shape of the vase evokes the basketry and pottery produced by Aboriginal North Americans, and this influence is also evident in several of the decorative motifs. The contributing craftsmen clearly aimed to pay tribute according to their knowledge and perceptions, to the continent’s First Nations. The large solid gold seal adorning the front of the vase bears the British Columbia coat of arms, designed by Arthur Beanlands and adopted in 1895. The Latin cross immediately beneath it is a surveying symbol that indicates the latitude and longitude of Paulding Creek, near Red Line Creek, where the Ptarmigan Mines and Mount Farnham (named for the designer) are situated.

The realistic figure of the golden-eyed silver bird perched on the rim of the vase — the source of its name — is a celebration of local fauna, the ptarmigan being a type of grouse found in Western Canada. Acquired with the help of generous funding from the Department of Canadian Heritage, the Ptarmigan Vase represents an outstanding tribute to British Columbia and a unique testimony to the close cultural ties that link Canada and the United States.



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