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Northwest Coast Indian Art

Author(s): Virginia Crawford

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Northwest Coast Indian Art

The Indians of the Northwest Coast inhabit a narrow strip of coastal land stretching from a southern boundary in mid-Washington State twelve hundred miles northward into Alaska. There are seven main linguistic groups or "tribes" in this area. The Tlingit are the farthest north with the Haida below them occupying the offshore Queen Charlotte Islands and the southern half of the Prince of Wales Islands. Across from the Haida on the mainland are the Tsimshian. To the south of them are the Kwakiutl, including a closely related tribe the Bella Coola. The Nootka inhabit Vancouver Island across from the Salish group who extend into Washington. The mountains form a natural barrier between them and the Indians of the interior. An unfriendly climate kept them from moving farther north into Alaska, while a rugged coastline kept them from exploring to the south. Thus the Indians kept mainly to the coast where there are abundant waterways and coastal rivers.

The economy of the Northwest Coast Indians was based on the abundant marine life. Every year the salmon make their runs upriver to the spawning grounds allowing the Indians to gather and preserve enough food to last through the winter season. While the men fished, the women would dry and prepare the catch for storage and also pick berries and roots to supplement their diet. It may not have been a varied diet by our standards, but compared with the difficulties of procuring nourishment that Indians in other parts of America had, their life was relatively easy. This security of sustenance enabled the Northwest Coast Indians to develop a sophisticated and complicated social system based on inherited and acquired clan rank.

Every aspect of their daily lives revolved around ritual. The spirit world played an important role in the way they carried out their everyday activities as well as their special ceremonies. They developed animistic beliefs that pervaded every aspect of their life and are especially evident in their art. The artifacts created by the Indians had a twofold purpose: first there was the desire to decorate, and second there was the intent to imbue the object with the spirit of the animal or mythological figure represented on it. The Indians believed that at one time animals and men were one, that the spirit of the animal resided in the man, and the man in the animal. Indeed, to them the metamorphosis of an animal into a human could still take place. Hence a basic theme of their myths is the confrontation of a man and an animal often with the animal in human form.

There are many tales of humans residing with animals, extracting power from them, and returning to human society

with these powers. This is one of the methods by which families and clans acquired their animal crests which specified their status within the community. The Indians created for themselves historic lineages which could be traced back to a particular animal. The northern tribes emphasized their inherited family heritages while in the southern tribes, especially the Nootka and Coast Salish, the basis of prestige was a personal encounter or mystical experience through which an individual stole or was given the particular powers of a specific animal.

The spirits could be both benevolent and harmful, and in either case it was thought best to keep some barrier between them and humans. This was the purpose of the winter ceremonies and dances. By these elaborate rituals, men appeased and placed restraints upon the overactive spirits who drew closest to mankind during the long, inactive winter months. During the summer the Indians were busy laying up provisions for the winter, but in the cold, foggy days of winter the spirit world awakened and threatened man's harmonious existence with nature. The most elaborately staged of the winter ceremonies were those of the Kwakiutl. They were full of intricately conceived dramatic effects and magical tricks which convinced the audience that the dancers were indeed possessed of supernatural power and that the spirits were actually in attendance. To achieve these effects they manufactured elaborate masks and headdresses which represented the various mythological characters in their dramas. Their masks were spectacularly carved and then painted with bright colors to heighten their dramatic impact. These ceremonies would go on for days and involve both the active and passive participation of the whole village.

In the north, society was based on the clan system. A clan was a group of households that could trace their heritage back to a common ancestor. These clans were then grouped into two or more phratries—the Haida had two whose symbols were the raven and the eagle; the Tsimshian had the raven, eagle, wolf, and bear; the Tlingit had the wolf and raven. In the southern tribes—the Kwakiutl, Nootka, and Coast Salish—the clan system was secondary in importance to the village community. These villages were made up of houses that contained family groups led by a house chief. The Haida, Tlingit, and Tsimshian practiced matrilineal descent of social and clan position; a male inherited his name, crests, and property rights from his maternal uncle. The Kwakiutl had descent coming through both lines. The Nootka, Bella Coola, and Coast Salish were patrilineal. Usually marriage in the same clan or phratry was prohibited, partly because marriage was an important



means of acquiring crests and rank privileges. The more different clans a family could marry into, the more rights they could claim.¹ During the summer months clan alliance was uppermost. During the winter months one's affiliation with a secret society became the basis of social life.

In 1786 Captain George Dixon, commanding the *Queen Charlotte*, wrote his impressions of the Northwest Coast Indians in his journals. He not only noted ethnological data but also observed the following about their art: "Their taste or design in working figures upon their garments, corresponds [to] their fondness for carving, in everything they make of wood. Nothing is without a kind of frieze-work, or the figure of some animal upon it; but the most general representation is that of the human face, which is often cut out upon birds, and other mentioned before; and even upon their stone and their bone weapons. . . . The imitative arts being nearly allied, no wonder that, to their skill in working figures in their garments, and carving them in wood, they should add that of drawing them in colours."² From the examples collected by these early explorers, it is obvious that the art of the Northwest Coast Indians was already set in its forms. The materials which they were using then basically continued to be used after contact with the Europeans. The main differences were in their tools, as they now had metal knives and adzes to do their

woodcarving. The change was quantitative rather than qualitative; their production increased with the use of labor saving tools.

The damp, mild climate of the Northwest Coast produced dense forests with an unending supply of material for building and carving. The trees supplied the planks for their large houses, the wood for their household items, and bark to be shredded for making their clothing, mats, and baskets. They became experts at woodworking as wood was the easiest to shape and the most readily available resource. Stone was difficult to use given the tools they had to work with. Ivory, animal horn, shell, and some native copper were adeptly used in small items and in ornamentation. Copper was to the Northwest Coast Indian what gold was to the white man. They used it as a medium of exchange, beating the raw copper into sheets that were then traded or sold. Each time it passed hands, the copper would acquire more value. The Indians developed an elaborate system of exchange, the purpose of which was to accrue the trappings of wealth.

The art of the Northwest Coast is intimately related to the natural world. It can be extremely realistic as in the little food bowls made in the form of small animals, such as the beaver or seal, or highly abstract as in the carved and painted storage chests and Chilkat blankets. No matter how abstract the de-

Figure 1. A group of Kwakiutl masked dancers who were members of the Cannibal Society and performed during the winter ceremonials. The chief who is holding the dance stands at the left grasping a speaker's staff and wearing a cedar-bark neckband and head-ring. A few of the spectators are visible at the far right. Edward S. Curtis, *The North American Indian*, x, pl. 358.

sign, it can ultimately be traced back to an animal or human form. In this respect, the art of the Indians reflects their animistic view of the universe.

In general, the two-dimensional art is abstract and the three-dimensional art is naturalistic. The abstract art of the Northwest Coast is the product of strict conventions of representation. It is a flat linear style made up of motifs which were used to represent parts of the animal's body. These design units were used as a kind of shorthand to identify the figure. Often mythological animals would be represented in human form and could be identified only by these symbolic motifs.

The artist's first concern was his field of design, and the figure would accommodate itself to this field. This often resulted in distortion of the animal's anatomy, causing problems of identification. The most common means of representation was to split or flatten the animal onto the surface revealing both profiles simultaneously; not only are the externals shown but often the internal parts are also indicated. This further complicates the reading of the design.³

Tribal variation in style is difficult to identify since the basic conventions of design apply to the whole coastal area. In general, the most formal, conventionalized decorative design occurs in the central portion, while to the north and south the style becomes more representational.⁴ The Tsimshian and Tlingit were especially adept at naturalistic carving with some of their masks evoking portrait-like impressions. The Kwakiutl and Bella Coola developed a more dramatic art style, with bright, vibrant colors to emphasize the strongly sculpted forms. The basic colors were red, black, and blue-green. These were all produced from natural plants and minerals. On the older masks these colors are muted. After 1880 with the advent of commercial paints, the colors became quite bright and garish.

The ceremonial dance masks of the Kwakiutl are among some of the most impressive artifacts produced in the Northwest Coast. These masks are part of an elaborate paraphernalia which was used in the winter secret society ceremonies. Many of the masks have movable parts that illustrate the metamorphosis of the spirit represented. A popular device was the mask-within-a-mask, often a human face hidden within that of an animal. When the mask is opened, it reveals the human face or spirit within the animal.

The art of the southern Nootka and Coast Salish is different from that of the northern tribes. For them it was the expression of an individual mystical experience or encounter with one of the mythological beings rather than the clan experience

that was important. This experience is expressed in a clear and simple abstract style, with little or no use of color.

Through the generosity of several donors and judicious purchases the Museum has acquired many pieces of superb craftsmanship illustrating several aspects of Northwest Coast Indian life. The following objects represent both the quality and range of the collection of Northwest Coast material in The Cleveland Museum of Art.

CMA 55.546 *Storage Box*, painted wood, 17-3/16 x 13-1/2 inches (43.7 x 34.3 cm.). Northwest Coast, Haida Tribe. The Harold T. Clark Educational Extension Fund. Ex collection: [Alfred Stendahl, Los Angeles]

Boxes of all shapes and sizes with varying degrees of decoration were the main form of household furniture. The Indians used boxes to store everything from their clothing and dried food to their finest ceremonial regalia. The largest, most elaborately carved and painted chests held the inherited signs of rank and privilege: furs, blankets, crest hats, and masks. These items were jealously guarded from those who had no right to their use. The storage chests which contained them were also objects of great value. They were made by special artists who carved on them the crest animal having personal significance for the individual who commissioned the chest.

The ingenuity with which these boxes were made is also impressive. They were formed from a single plank of wood which was notched in three places and then steamed until it could be bent to form the box. The open ends were then sewed or tied together. The lid and base were made from separate pieces. The boxes could be rectangular or square depending on where the notches were placed.

The decoration of these boxes illustrates the basic conventions of Northwest Coast art. At first glance, the decorations can appear overly complicated, apparently the result of a compulsion to fill all of the surface with some form of design. On close inspection, however, the individual design elements separate out from the whole and then the relationships of these units to each other and the overall design becomes clear.

Bill Holm, a noted authority on Northwest Coast art, has designated the basic element of these two-dimensional linear designs as the "formline." This term describes the lines that define the primary and secondary design motifs. It is the swelling and undulating formline that ties the design units together and creates the sense of movement in Northwest

Right: Figure 2. *Storage Box*. Northwest Coast, Haida Tribe. CMA 55.546

Far Right: Figure 3. *Spoon*. Northwest Coast, Tlingit Tribe. CMA 21.1575

Bottom: Figure 4. *Spoon*. Northwest Coast, Tlingit Tribe. CMA 18.754

Coast art. The primary formline, in most instances, is black and defines the main parts of the design. The secondary elements of the design are painted red. These secondary elements are used as accents and fillers within the primary design. Secondary designs are usually enclosed by the black primary formline and always connect with it so there is a continuous flow between secondary and primary forms. Tertiary areas are sometimes painted blue-green, blue, or green and at others left plain to form a ground for the design. On the boxes which are both carved and painted, the primary and secondary formlines are on the plane surface and the tertiary areas are recessed, often unpainted. Once the formline pattern of an object becomes recognizable, the design motifs are easily identified.

The decoration of a box can be organized in two ways. One type has the front and back of the box covered with symmetrical, bilateral formline designs which are almost identical. The two side panels, in most cases, have a single motif. So there is a contrast between the intricate crowded faces and the simplified, spare designs on the alternating sides. In the second type of arrangement, all four sides are covered with the design which breaks at the corner axis and spills back across the consecutive sides. The Cleveland Museum's storage box (Figure 2) is of the second type. The two sides are almost mirror images, but there are slight variations in the tertiary designs. The avoidance of exact repetition is characteristic of Northwest Coast art which constantly varies the basic design units to create new patterns. This modification of design is apparent in the boxes and in the rich patterns of the Chilkat blankets.

The design on the Cleveland box depicts a highly abstracted animal. In the upper half of the box, the black formline defines the face of the animal which is split through the middle of the nose and mouth at the corner of the box. The artist has used a double-eye design which creates a miniature face, complete with nose and mouth, within the main face. The animal's ears are above the back formline at the top of the box with an oval-eye unit filling in the corner area. Split-U designs in the red secondary formline fill in the space between the cheek of the animal and the edge of the box. The bottom half of the box contains the abbreviated body of the animal. Again the use of the eye design creates another face. Below the two eyes, is the fluted tail of a sea animal. At the two sides are two figures which also represent either the flippers or feet of the animal. The ovoid eye at the bottom of this device indicates that the eye is used here as a joint. In the bottom corners, we have another filler design consisting of split-U and eye designs. Variants of this basic scheme are to be found on many boxes.

CMA 21.1575 *Spoon*, carved horn, L. 14 inches (35.5 cm.). Northwest Coast, Tlingit Tribe. Gift of A. W. Price.

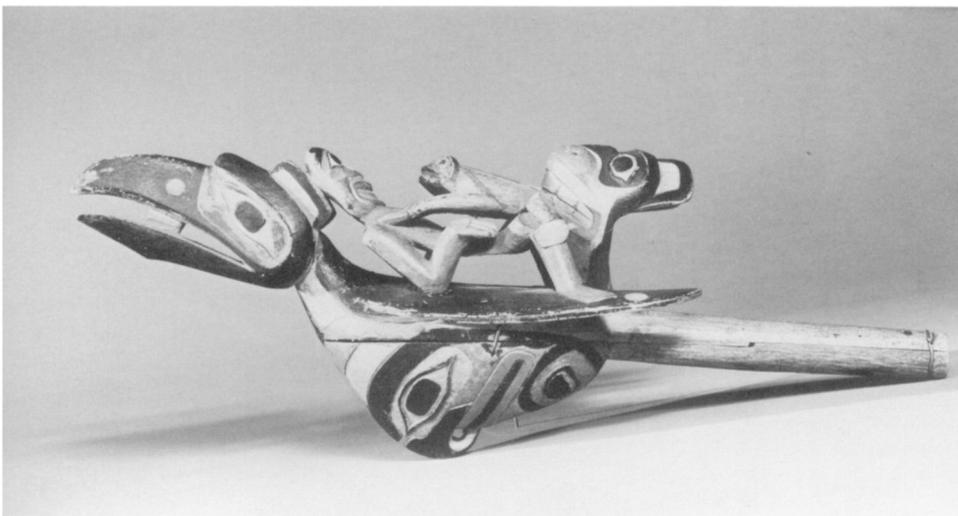
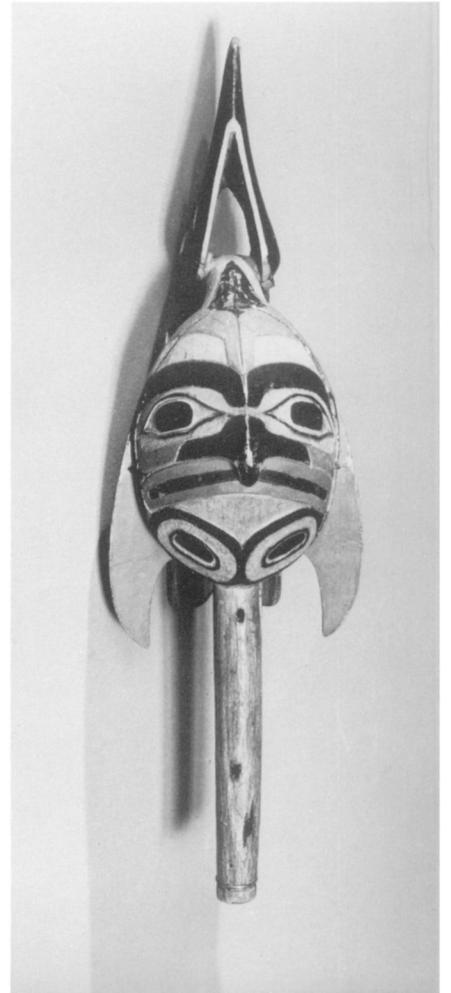
CMA 18.754 *Spoon*, carved horn, L. 10-3/4 inches (27.3 cm.). Northwest Coast, Tlingit. Purchased by the Educational Department. Ex collection: C. S. Hill, New York.

Spoons were used exclusively for eating and serving food by the Northwest Coast Indians, knives were all-purpose utensils, and there were no forks. The spoons used for everyday meals were not usually decorated and were made out of wood. Those used at ceremonial occasions were carved and made from either mountain goat or sheep horn. They ranged in size from small individual spoons to large ladles that sometimes doubled as serving dishes. The large ladles could be quite elaborately carved, but did not surpass the sculptural sensitivity shown in the small carved spoons.

These spoons were made by steaming the horn and then pressing it in a mold. The upper part of the handle was carved directly into the horn retaining the natural curve of the horn. Often the spoons were made of two pieces of horn, with the darker goat horn forming the handle and the lighter sheep's horn forming the translucent bowl.

The designs on these spoons are essentially the same as on the monumental totem poles, that is, crest figures rising one above the other. The Cleveland Museum owns two spoons that demonstrate particularly fine carving and sensitively shaped forms. The first (Figure 3) shows a bird holding a man upside down by the legs. Its long beak curves down to merge with the man's nose. Above the bird sits a man wearing a potlatch hat. These basketry hats had rings set in the crown that indicated the number of potlatches the chief had given. The greater the number of rings, the more prestigious the chief. The second spoon (Figure 4) depicts a bird's head, probably an eagle, above which squats a beaver, identified by his buck teeth and the broad tail with crosshatching which is on the back of the spoon. Above the beaver, his tail curving down between the beaver's ears, is a killer whale, which is identified by the dorsal fin on his back. The whale, in turn holds another bird in his mouth. This bird could be a raven with an elongated beak. The artist in each of these spoons has taken great care to integrate the forms of the animals so there is an easy transition from one form to the other. There is a monumental quality to these spoons that is reminiscent of the great totem poles.





Top: Figures 5 and 6. *Ladle*. Northwest Coast, Tlingit Tribe, late 19th century. CMA 53.386

Bottom: Figures 7 and 8. *Rattle*. Northwest Coast, probably Tlingit Tribe, late 19th century. CMA 21.1577

CMA 53.386 *Ladle*, carved horn, copper bound, shell; handle: L. 12 inches (30.5 cm.); eagle: 6-1/4 x 4-3/4 inches (15.9 x 12.1 cm.); bowl: 7-1/2 x 5 inches (19.1 x 12.7 cm.). Northwest Coast, Tlingit Tribe, late nineteenth century. The Harold T. Clark Educational Extension Fund. Ex collection: Ralph C. Altman, Los Angeles. Exhibitions: Kansas City, Missouri, The Nelson Gallery and Atkins Museum of Fine Arts, 1962: *The Imagination of Primitive Man* (cat. by Ralph T. Coe), cat. no. 168; London, Hayward Gallery, and Kansas City, The Nelson Gallery and Atkins Museum of Fine Arts, 1976-1977: *Sacred Circles* (cat. by Ralph T. Coe), no. 326, illus.

The Cleveland Museum owns a particularly beautiful horn ladle bound in copper and surmounted by an eagle made of shell and horn (Figure 5). Pieces of iridescent shell are inlaid on the handle, the eagle's eyes, and on the bottom of the bowl. Large, elaborately decorated ladles such as this were used in ceremonial feasts and were symbolic of the rank and prestige of their owners. Only a great chief could use such a ladle. The guests and participants at these feasts were seated by order of rank and the utensils supplied them reflected their place in this social hierarchy.

The design on the bottom of the bowl most likely represents a bear with high, curved nostrils, a wide mouth, and its tongue protruding through the prominent teeth (Figure 6). However, it does have some of the characteristics of a sea monster which is depicted with attributes of both the bear and the killer whale. In this representation, the circular pieces of inlaid shell which curve back from between the bear's ears could be interpreted as the dorsal fin of the whale.⁵ The eagle at the top of the ladle refers to a Tlingit clan crest. The Tlingit were divided into two main clans, the Eagle and the Raven. Within their clans, families could own several subsidiary crests among which might be the bear.

The possession of a crest animal represents an encounter between that animal and a member of the clan. The inventory of rank includes several crests, individualized songs and dances, inherited titles, and personal names. The more of these acquired, the more rank has been achieved within the society. So it was considered very important to accumulate these throughout a lifetime and then to pass them on to descendants. Every time a title, crest, song, or dance is bestowed or transferred there is a celebration. These are known as potlatches, which are merely public recognition of an individual's intention of taking possession of a crest, rank, or title. By their participation in the potlatch, a man's neighbors and the rest

of the community recognize his right to the title. Usually only a great chief could afford to sponsor a potlatch and even he had to call upon the support and resources of his entire village. They are willing to support him because his glory reflects on them. Then to cement his position further, the chief would invite all the neighboring chiefs and their families to act as witnesses.

During the days of feasting and dancing that constitute the potlatch, many gifts are given and much food is consumed. By accepting this hospitality, the rival chiefs and their families are accepting the obligation to repay it at a future date. If a chief does not indicate that he will do so, he loses face and cannot regain his prestige until he has given a potlatch equaling or surpassing the generosity of the first chief.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century with the increased wealth resulting from the active fur trade, the potlatch became an extravagant occasion with thousands of blankets, silver bracelets, and even huge war canoes being given away. The host had to be willing to face bankruptcy himself, knowing that all this would be returned with interest at a future date. This system of exchange and eventual return was an integral part of the Indians' economy.

CMA 21.1577 *Rattle*, carved and painted wood, L. 12-1/2 inches (31.7 cm.). Northwest Coast, probably Tlingit Tribe, late nineteenth century. Gift of A. W. Price.

Traditionally, the raven rattle is said to have originated among the Tsimshian. It was then taken over by the Tlingit and in later times spread to most of the Indian tribes in the coastal areas. The best rattles were made by the Tsimshian, the Tlingit, and the Haida, who traded them to other tribes. The rattle's components were standardized, consisting of the main body of the raven, with the formline face of a hawk or thunderbird on its breast, and a man reclining on the raven's back. A frog perches on the man. In most rattles, there is a tongue connecting the frog and man. The significance of this device is obscure, but it is usually considered to represent a transfer of power from the frog to the man. The last figure is commonly a bird who holds the frog in its beak. On the Cleveland rattle (Figures 7 and 8) this figure appears to be a bear.

The raven is a mythological figure of great importance. According to Indian creation myths, he was responsible for stealing and bringing the sun to mankind and is often portrayed with the sun disk or a pellet in his mouth.

When the rattle is used by a dancer or by a speaker in a ceremony, it is held down and out to the side and vibrated continuously rather than shaken up and down in a rhythmic beat. Bill Holm reports that “most northern dancers hold the rattle upside down, with the breast-bird looking upward. There is a tale of the loss of a rattle which came to life when it was held upright and flew away through the smoke-hole in the roof of the house.”⁶ Often referred to as a “chief’s rattle,” the raven rattle was used by the headman or chief dancer at ceremonial dances.

These raven rattles are among the most decorative and colorful of Northwest Coast artifacts. Even though the components are standardized, each rattle is a unique expression of artistic sensitivity. Nowhere else in Northwest Coast art is the combination of two-dimensional and three-dimensional styles more effectively expressed than in these small pieces. The full sculptural quality of the figures on the back of the raven contrasts with the shallow relief carving and two-dimensional formline painting of the hawk face on the breast. The three basic colors of Northwest Coast art—black, red, and blue-green—are used on the rattles. These colors are also used in other objects, such as painted and carved boxes, masks, and totem crests.

CMA 52.251 *Chilkat Blanket*, cedar bark and wool, 68 x 54-1/4 inches (172.7 x 137.5 cm.). Northwest Coast, Tlingit Tribe, Wrangell, late nineteenth century. The Harold T. Clark Educational Extension Fund. Ex collections: Alex Rasmussen; Rev. Arthur H. Limouze, East Marion, Long Island. Exhibition: Chicago, The Art Institute of Chicago, 1964 (cat. by Allen Wardwell), cat. no. 204.

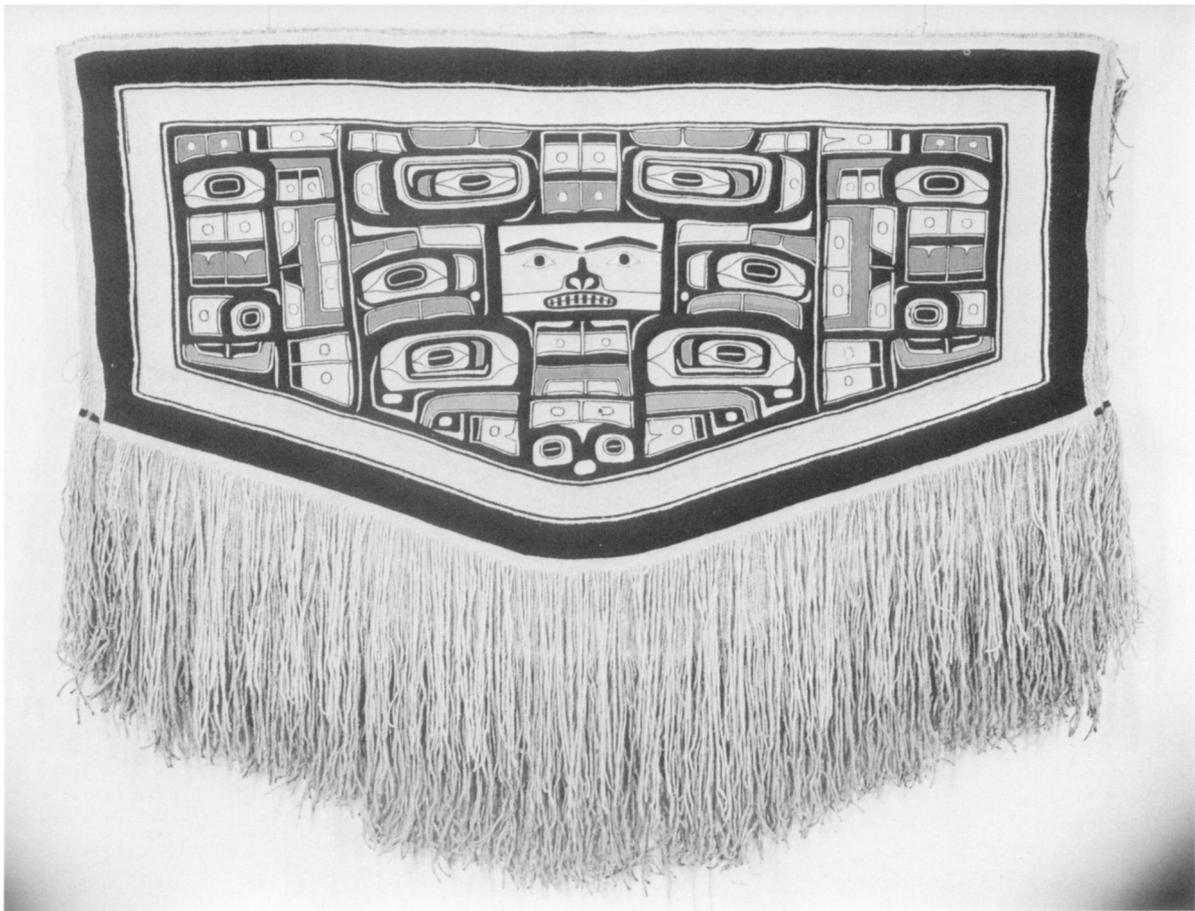
While men were responsible for the creation and carving of the household and ceremonial objects, women did the weaving, both of basketry and the textiles used for clothing. Clothes were minimal in early times, consisting of skirts made of shredded cedar bark for the women and breech clouts for the men. Both sexes supplemented this costume with animal skin capes which were worn over the shoulder and tied under the chin. They also made capes of twined cedar bark which could be trimmed with fur. This was the everyday costume before the arrival of the white man. After European contact, there were some changes in costume with the Indians adopting the cast-off jackets and coats of the sailors. Some wool blankets were woven using the wool from mountain goats and even

dog hair, but wool was scarce and the primary material used was cedar bark.

Ceremonial costumes were truly spectacular, and it is evident that the Indians spent a great deal of time and effort making them. One of the most prized possessions was a Chilkat blanket (Figure 9). These blankets were a symbol of great social prestige and both men and women could wear them. The blanket is supposed to have originated with the Tsimshian and passed to the Tlingit, especially the Chilkat branch for whom it is named. They were the main producers, and their blankets were then traded throughout the Northwest Coast area. In the late nineteenth century, such blankets were used by nearly all the tribes.

The production of the blanket was a joint effort between a man and his wife. He painted the design on a pattern board from which she wove the blanket. Since the design is bilaterally symmetrical, the pattern board need only show half of the design. Several blankets would be copied from one pattern board which accounts for there being many similar blankets, with only slight variations to differentiate them. Unlike most examples of weaving that have painted designs as a source, the design of the Chilkat blanket retains the curvilinear aspect of the painted design rather than translating it into angular patterns. This is the result of the weaving technique. The blankets were hand-twined on a simple loom consisting of two uprights with a crossbar from which the warp is suspended. The warp is made of twisted cedar bark which is covered with soft wool. The cedar bark gives strength and texture to the blanket. The warp is never colored and is completely enclosed by the woof. The woof is dyed three colors: black, yellow, and a greenish blue. These colors, along with the natural white of the wool, make up the design. The blanket is worked in sections which are then sewn together, enabling the weaver to maintain the flowing curvilinear lines of the original painted pattern.⁷

The blanket is shaped with the top and sides straight and the bottom edge tapering down to a point which is wider at the middle than at the sides. Long fringe hangs from this bottom edge. Since these blankets were worn for special dances, the fringe has an important role in the effect which the dancer creates by his swaying movements. The design on the blanket is organized so that when the blanket is wrapped around the body, the central portion covers his back and the side panels come around to meet in the front. There are three divisions to the design, the central and two narrower side portions. These three fields of design are usually separated quite clearly. The design is interpreted as an animal, the central section being



the head and body and the side sections wings or feet. Some interpretations describe the central section as an animal with the lateral fields as birds or animals standing like heraldic figures. Strict interpretation of these designs is difficult and varies with the source.

Anthropologist Franz Boas proposed two basic design formats for the central part of the blanket. The first type has the face centered in the lower half of the blanket with two large eyes, one in each of the upper corners, and two small inverted eyes below the face. The ears of the animal are placed above the large upper eyes. The mouth arcs between the two eyes, and the rectangular face, in this instance, is actually the body of the animal. The two smaller eyes below are the double-joint of the tail, these joints being represented by an oval eye-design. The second type has the rectangular face in the middle with two large eyes set at the corners above and below. The second design is the more symmetrical of the two. The animal is split bilaterally, as if cut down the middle and flattened out to each side, showing both profiles simultaneously.⁸

The Cleveland Museum owns three Chilkat blankets, one of the first type described and two of the second. An early collector of Northwest Coast Indian art, George T. Emmons,⁹

analyzed a blanket similar to the one illustrated in Figure 9: "The design represents a whale. The head, with nostril and mouth, is shown below. The central face represents the body; the eyes near the upper border are the flukes of the tail; the large wing designs at the sides of the body, the fins. The lateral fields represent a young raven sitting, [and] at the same time the sides and back of the whale."¹⁰ Emmons's description so closely matches the Cleveland blanket that they were obviously made from the same pattern board. In our blanket the side wing designs have been replaced by oval-eye joints that can also be interpreted as the dorsal fin of the killer whale. The anthropologist John Swanton analyzing the same design says, "This blanket represents a killer-whale; the central design on each side of the body, each one-half of the dorsal fin; the small wing designs in the lateral fields, the ribs and other inner parts of the body."¹¹ So, while the basic description of the animal is the same, the details differ according to the interpreter who reads them. Since the same symbols may be used to represent different parts of different animals, and since they also sometimes have no more meaning than as fillers of space, analyzing the details of these designs is often imprecise.



CMA 29.264 *Basket*, twined, false embroidery, 12 x 12 inches (30.5 x 30.5 cm.). Northwest Coast, Tlingit Tribe, late nineteenth-early twentieth century. Gift of Mrs. Lionel A. Sheldon.

Baskets were produced by the Indian women for utilitarian purposes. They stored the dried fish and berries in them; they used them as drinking cups and even cooking vessels. Since baskets were such major household utensils, producing them was an important domestic duty for the women.

The most common technique of manufacture was twining. A double-weft was twisted and passed over and under the single warp. This creates a tight, fine grained surface for the basket. The principal material used was spruce root. The ornamentation on the baskets was applied after the basket was made and is called "false embroidery." Other kinds of grasses and the stems of maidenhair ferns were used for the embroidery which only shows on the exterior of the basket.

Some of the tribes, particularly the Tlingit, decorated their baskets with elaborate geometric patterns for which they assigned symbolic names, such as "head of a salmonberry and cross" and "Hood of the Raven."¹¹ The geometric designs were usually applied in three bands with one of the bands being repeated as in the Cleveland example (Figure 10). Triangles, chevrons, zigzag lines, and crosses were the most common motifs. These could be arranged in many inventive patterns which were subjectively symbolic.

Figure 10. *Basket*. Northwest Coast, Tlingit Tribe, late 19th-early 20th century. CMA 29.264

Figure 11. *Panel Pipe*. Northwest Coast, Queen Charlotte Islands, Haida Tribe, mid-19th century. CMA 58.371

CMA 27.475 *Model of a Totem Pole*, argillite, H. 16-1/2 inches (41.9 cm.). Northwest Coast, Queen Charlotte Islands, Haida Tribe, ca. 1890-1900. Gift of Mrs. F. F. Prentiss.

CMA 58.371 *Panel Pipe*, argillite, L. 10-5/8 inches (27 cm.). Northwest Coast, Queen Charlotte Islands, Haida Tribe, mid-nineteenth century. Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Sherman E. Lee.

Contact with the early European sailors encouraged the development of a distinctive art form among the Indians of the Queen Charlotte Islands. The Haida discovered that they could trade carvings of argillite to the sailors and quickly adapted their native art forms to the souvenir-hunting taste of their white visitors. Argillite is a black, fine grained, carbonaceous shale found only on the Queen Charlotte Islands. When carved it has a very pleasing sheen and is cool and smooth to the touch. The earliest collection of argillite carvings dates from the 1820s, indicating its late development.¹²

The Cleveland Museum has two fine argillite carvings in its collection. One is a model totem pole and the other a non-functional panel pipe. The totem pole is the most commonly recognized form of Northwest Coast art. Its forceful and unique decoration has always appealed to popular imagination, so it was a natural form to be chosen for commercial exploitation. There are actually several types of totem poles, including mortuary poles, house frontal poles (totem poles built onto the front of the house with a hole cut into them to serve as an entrance to the family dwelling), and the best known form, a commemorative pole carved with the totemic crests of the family erecting it. The commemorative poles had great social significance and commemorated great events, such as an important marriage or a victory in war. The chief family of a tribe would acquire many crests during their years of accumulating social status. These crests were handed down from generation to generation. Totem poles because of their perishable nature had to be replaced periodically, and when a new one was erected, the whole village would celebrate.

Our model pole (back cover) depicts from top to bottom, an eagle, a raven with the sun disk in his mouth, a female bear with a man in her mouth and holding another man upside down in front of her, and a sea monster at the base. The sea monster is a mythological figure comprised of attributes of both the bear and killer-whale. The head of the whale has the ears of a bear. The fluked tail comes up between bear paws and is held in the whale's mouth. There are two fins that could also be the dorsal fin of the whale split in half and placed on either



side of the figure. Such composite mythological monsters are common in Northwest Coast iconography.

The carving on this piece is very fine, with each figure carefully linked to the other. The eye follows the progression through the figures with no difficulty and perceives many delightful details along the way: the fine feathering of the eagle who perches on the raven's head; the tail feathers of the raven showing between his feet, the latter being placed between the ears of the bear; and the concise formline drawings on the tail and side-fins of the sea monster, all of which combine to give a crisp, clear quality to the carving. Complementing this is the smooth transition of contours from one plane to another, creating subtle highlights on the polished stone.

The panel pipes (Figure 11) were developed in the 1840s when the subject matter of the argillite carvings became more European in orientation.¹² The Indians were fascinated with the sailors, their ships, their clothes, and even their hair styles. This fascination was translated into the argillite pipes which were long frieze-like panels with several realistically carved figures. Action on the Cleveland pipe is separated into three sections. At the front there are two men, the one falling backwards into the hands of a seated sailor. The standing figure wears a frock coat and has his hands clasped in front of him as if he were a missionary praying. The details of the sailor's costume are complete even to the buttons on his trousers. The actual pipe bowl takes the form of a smokestack with a European motif. In the next section a sailor and an Indian sit facing each other. The sailor is sitting on a finely detailed chair with his hands in front of him clasped by a nude Indian. Sometimes a nude figure shown with its hair down in this manner represents a witch. Next is a palm tree-like device with a knob at the top and at the back of the pipe a sea serpent with his nose down and his tail twisted up. His tail echoes the palm effect of the little tree. Despite the European content of this pipe, we can see the Indian origin of its style in the shape of the eye sockets and the crosshatching used to give texture to the

recessed areas. Thus these pipes are a further example of the Indians' imaginative delight in the exotic that we see expressed in so much of their art.

VIRGINIA CRAWFORD
Assistant Curator of Decorative Arts

1. Robert Bruce Inverarity. *Art of the Northwest Coast Indians* (Berkeley, 1950), pp. 22-23.
2. Polly Miller, *Lost Heritage of Alaska* (Cleveland, 1967), p. 50.
3. See chapter on Northwest Coast art in Franz Boas, *Primitive Art* (Oslo, 1927), for detailed analysis of style and motifs.
4. Bill Holm, *Northwest Coast Indian Art* (Seattle, 1965), p. 20. This is the best and most complete of the recent analyses of Northwest Coast decorative forms.
5. Boas, p. 228, fig. 231.
6. Bill Holm, *Crooked Beak of Heaven* (Seattle, 1972), p. 30.
7. Erna Gunther, *Art in the Life of the Northwest Coast Indian* (Portland, 1966), p. 77.
8. Franz Boas, "Notes on the Blanket Designs," in George T. Emmons, *The Chilkat Blanket* (American Museum of Natural History, *Memoirs*, III [New York, 1907]), pp. 355-356.
9. Lieutenant George T. Emmons of the U.S. Navy was responsible for locating and collecting a major portion of the Northwest Coast objects in American museums today. From the time he arrived in Alaska in 1882 at the age of 30 until he died in 1945, he maintained an active interest in acquiring important works of Indian art for American museums. More to the point, he also noted ethnological data on each piece. There are no major collections in this country that do not contain some item collected by Emmons, but the institution that benefited the most was the American Museum of Natural History in New York. It owns about 5,200 objects collected by him, a figure which reflects the immensity of his undertaking. Allen Wardwell, *Objects of Bright Pride* (New York, 1978).
10. Franz Boas, "Notes on Blanket Designs," p. 374, fig. 564a.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 378, fig. 568a.
12. Gunther, p. 45.
13. Holm, *Crooked Beak of Heaven*, p. 86.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 89.