



IMAGES OF NEW WORLD NATIVES

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A Mythology Reflects Its Region

A mythology reflects its region. Here
In Connecticut, we never lived in a time
When mythology was possible — But if we had —
That raises the question of the image's truth.
The image must be of the nature of its creator.
It is the nature of its creator increased,
Heightened. It is he, anew, in a freshened youth
And it is he in the substance of his region,
Wood of his forests and stone out of his fields
Or from under his mountains.

Wallace Stevens





The sources for this exhibit are the tribes of the Northwest Coast, a geographical region comprising sections of southern Alaska, British Columbia and Washington. Interchanges along the rugged, sparsely inhabited coastline give the area a cultural unity based on similar mythology, ceremonies and artistic traditions. Within this context one can observe distinct aspects of local and tribal character. Although the exhibition demonstrates a basic foreignness to the artistic, religious and intellectual heritage of the West, such conceptual differences present no obstacle to an appreciation of the vitality and sensitivity of observation and handling evident in these images.

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James E. Nicholson

POST-CONTACT ART OF THE NORTHWEST COAST

James E. Nicholson

The Northwest Coast is a misty, verdant land of high mountains emerging from the sea. Beyond dense forests of towering cedars, the ocean deeply indents the coastline and encircles innumerable islands. Before diseases from foreign contact reduced its members and missionaries and governments dismantled its cultures, the eleven hundred miles from Yakutat Bay to Puget Sound provided its sixty thousand native inhabitants with an abundance of wildlife, birds and fish and the diverse materials used by its artisans.

The natural wealth of the region, augmented by the development of techniques for food preservation, enabled the Indians to devote themselves to the refinement of elaborate rituals and carved images. Society along the Northwest Coast was rigidly stratified, and social rivalries were pursued within and beyond the village tribes. The major means for attaining and maintaining status was the potlatch ceremony — a huge feast attended by neighboring tribes which often lasted several days. Great amounts of food were consumed and fortunes in beautifully carved objects were destroyed to demonstrate the host's disdain for his own wealth or were distributed to the guests as an expression of his generosity. Social position also was enhanced by marriages, arranged between villages, which also included the transferal of artifacts. The Indian society thus strongly patronized creativity and encouraged the wide dissemination of styles. The environment, which suggests isolation, provided the wealth and attendant social and artistic interchange necessary for the unified cultural identity of the Northwest Coast.

Within this general context, the art of each tribe has characteristic qualities. The Haida, Tlingit and Tsimshian carvings show an emphasis on realism within an abstract format, and in their cultures masks depicting specific personages found their highest expressions. The Tsimshian carvings in particular demonstrate a sensitivity to facial structure. Among the Kwakiutl and Bella Coola tribes imaginary creatures were depicted by the Coast's largest masks, which often had moving parts. The southern tribes were cruder in their carving with less interest in the plastic possibilities of wood. Their ceremonies were less dramatic than their northern counterparts and masks were employed less frequently. However, because of the frequent exchange of carvings between tribal groups and the lack of written records, specific attribution to villages and often tribes on the basis of style alone is hesitant at best — especially in the case of northern groups.

Contact with Western civilization was initially beneficial for the Indians, opening new markets for furs which added to the wealth of the region and the growth of social competition and social demand for art. Trade provided sheet copper, iron nails and new cloths and pigments which the artists quickly adapted to native styles and uses. With the employment of new European materials and tools for carving, the production of totem poles, masks and other objects was greatly facilitated. The arts enjoyed a short-lived renaissance of great beauty and diversity, only to be followed by the collapse of the cultures as pressure grew for them to abandon their "pagan" practices and beliefs. The elaborate quality of this short period's artistic output and the intricacy of its rituals have led many ethnologists and art historians to consider it the height of the Northwest Coast civilization.

In tribal mythology there was a long period of time after creation during which all human beings existed in darkness. Their condition aroused the sympathy of Raven, the nephew of Nas-ca-ki-yel, who alone existed from the beginning of time and things. Raven schemed to trick his uncle and bring light into the world. Turning himself into a hemlock needle, he jumped into a cup of water and was consumed by the Nas-ca-ki-yel's daughter. She became pregnant and bore Raven. In his guise as a baby, he whined and would not be satisfied until his grandfather gave him three boxes, in which the moon, stars and sun were hidden. The spoiled child's cries and refusals to eat or drink forced his grandfather to surrender the boxes, which were opened, releasing the heavenly bodies.

Humans were frightened by the daylight, and they fled into the woods, water and sky, becoming animals, fish and birds, depending upon the skins they had been wearing. For example, those wearing seal coats were transformed into seals; those clothed in bird skins flew away. The unfortunate people who were naked remained human.

With references to the images in the exhibition, the preceding legend suggests the importance of transformation in Northwest Coast thought. Their concept of the universe includes a belief in the ability of a spirit to occupy different forms. During the winter the natural and supernatural worlds were believed to be in conjunction, and elaborate ceremonial exercises were performed to induce the spirits to reveal themselves. Dancers wore masks depicting mythological creatures, animal forms, or specific human entities, whose spirits would enter and animate the bodies of the participants. The masks, then, were not purely representational, for they were considered a means of bridging the void between the physical and spiritual realms. The other

presence which is externally implied when a man dons a mask is only an analogy to the transformation which follows the exorcism of the spirit of the portrayed being.

The importance of the spiritual in Northwest Coast ceremonies is best illustrated by the Kwakiutl tribe, who carved masks which concretely depicted the dual nature of life. Their so-called transformation masks operate mechanically with strings which, when pulled, open the hinged mask to reveal an interior face representing the spirit of the outer character.

Particular animal spirits were closely identified with families, and the display of their forms on helmets and totem poles was a hereditary right which the Indians guarded closely. The animal crests were complemented by songs, dances and stories which were regarded to be the property of the clan and which gave recognition to an ancestor's encounter with a supernatural being. Ceremonial exercises provided an opportunity for the tribes to re-enact their supernatural histories and reaffirm the significance of their decorative symbols.

Among the Northwest Coast people there was a synthetic belief in the uniformity of life. Just as the humans took on aspects of animals when Raven revealed the sun, the salmon were believed to live in Indian-style dwellings at the bottom of the sea, and when among themselves they walked around without fish clothing to cover their human bodies. Each year they would swim toward the shore to spawn and be caught by the Indians, who thought the salmon allowed themselves to be captured for mankind's benefit. The fish carcasses were returned to the sea, where bones of the immortal salmon became covered with flesh for the next year's run. The event was anticipated by tradi-

tional observances. The Kwakiutl performed an annual salmon ritual employing a huge mechanical headpiece of a mythical sea bear. The movement of its fins and tail and its generally horrifying appearance were responsible for frightening the salmon toward the shore.

The Northwest Coast Indians had an understanding with nature to which they applied a human consciousness. They felt that the forces of nature had a sympathy for their needs derived from the Indians' gratitude for past generosity and honor for the memory of past contacts with the supernatural. There is an extended sense of interdependence: man is dependent upon nature and the supernatural, but his rituals make the relationship reciprocal.

The shaman was especially adept at manipulating supernatural beings. And because illness was considered to be the result of actions by evil spirits, his services were often required. Taking place at night in a large room lit by a single blaze, his curing rites had a great dramatic impact on his spellbound audience. The shaman sang words taught him during a vision by the supernatural beings at his disposal. As the being approached, the tempo of his rattle and singing increased and his dancing became frenzied. When in full possession of his magic capabilities, he would extract the afflicting agent, often to the detriment of the supernatural being responsible. An ailment for which a shaman's talents were also needed was the loss of the soul, a malady characterized by the wasting away of the patient. The shaman's responsibility was to retrieve the soul by employing his supernatural helpers or by making the perilous journey into the spiritual world himself. Soul catchers — charms carved from bone — were accessories used in the shaman's effort to contain temporarily the strayed soul.

It is a traditional belief among the Northwest Coast

Indians that Nas-ca-ki-yel considered the creation of man from stone and from leaf. The latter, being a more workable medium, was chosen. Nas-ca-ki-yel then showed the humans a leaf, saying: "You see this leaf. You are to be like it. When it falls off the branch and rots there is nothing left of it."

The comparison is lamentably applicable to the art and culture of the Northwest Coast as well as the Indians themselves. Cedar was the major material they fashioned, and its ability to survive has been greatly limited by the damp environment on the coast. Because of neglect, many fine examples of their most unique art form, the totem pole, rotted beyond recovery in this century. Other poles, masks, decorated houses and ceremonial objects were destroyed because of a misunderstanding of and insensitivity to non-Western iconography. What remains today from the hostile physical and cultural environment is largely a single-period style from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is from this post-contact era that the images in the exhibition were selected, and they evidence the vigor and aesthetic sophistication of the Northwest Coast culture, the decline of which, though recent in human history, was complete.

THE NORTHWEST COAST

1. Ceremonial ladle, unknown origin
Horn. Length $11\frac{1}{4}$ inches. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Philip M. Isaacson. This piece has designs incised and in relief.
2. Ceremonial ladle, unknown origin
Horn, iron. Length 13 inches. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Philip M. Isaacson. The top figure, wearing a hat with four potlatch cylinders, has an exposed rib cage, suggesting that the spoon was used at a funeral potlatch.
3. Tlingit chest
Wood, paint, leather. Height 17 inches. Lent by the Princeton University Museum of Natural History. This storage box was formed from one piece of wood bent by steaming and joined together. (PU5256)
4. Kwakiutl ceremonial dish
Wood. Length $25\frac{1}{2}$ inches. Lent by the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University. Two grizzly bears hold up the container. (87176)
5. Kwakiutl ceremonial dish (two halves)
Wood, paint. Length $37\frac{1}{2}$ inches. Lent by the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University. This vessel is in the form of a whale. (87173)
6. Decayed shaman, unknown origin
Wood, paint, iron. Height 23 inches. Lent by the Princeton University Museum of Natural History. The figure once adorned a shaman's grave, revealing an abbreviated skeleton exposed by the decay of flesh. (PU5159)
7. Bella Coola skull
Wood, human hair, iron. Height $6\frac{1}{2}$ inches. Lent by the Milwaukee Public Museum. The skull, with deeply hollowed sockets and a ridge around the face, may be a fragment from a larger headpiece. (17356/4615)
8. Tlingit helmet
Wood, paint, hair, leather, nails. Height 10 inches. Lent by the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University. Portrait helmets, often used with a carved visor, provided protection during warfare. (1587)
9. Coast Salish human mask, **oversize**
Wood, paint. Height $11\frac{1}{4}$ inches. Lent by the Peabody Museum

of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University. (50484)

10. Kwakiutl transformation mask

Wood, paint, feathers, string. Length 16½ inches. Lent by the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University. The outer raven mask opens to disclose another face, identified by the collector as a representation of the sun. This mask may allude to the release of the sun into the world by Raven, or the inner mask may depict the spirit of the exterior form. (87190)

11. Kwakiutl Tsonoqua mask

Wood, graphite, paint, hair. Height 11 inches. Lent by the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University. This mask represents a mythological wild woman living in the woods. She is reputed to steal children and eat them, and her mouth is perpetually uttering a distinct cry. The myths indicate that she has a supernatural power to return to life after her enemies kill her. (87188)

12. Tsimshian gorilla mask

Wood, paint. Width 7½ inches. Lent by the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University. This mask is reported to have been carved by an Indian with no knowledge of apes. It depicts a legendary woodland creature, possibly providing early evidence of the "Bigfoot," or North American abominable snowman. (85877)

13. Haida owl mask

Wood, paint. Height 9½ inches. Lent anonymously. This mask was collected before 1840. (Illustrated on cover)

14. Kwakiutl raven headdress

Wood, paint, cedar bark. Length 29 inches. Lent by the Princeton University Museum of Natural History. (PU5158)

15. Tlingit raven mask

Wood, paint. Length 14 inches (sight). Lent by the Princeton University Museum of Natural History. This piece has a movable jaw. Its bright pigments may be trade paint. (PU3958)

16. Tlingit shark mask

Wood, copper, leather, paint. Height 10½ inches. Lent by the Princeton University Museum of Natural History. The turned-down edges of the mouth and three gill slits on the side are characteristic of shark iconography in this otherwise human mask. (PU3922)

17. Tsimshian dance kilt
Trade cloth, puffin beaks, woven porcupine quills. Width 48 inches. Lent by the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University. (85903)
18. Haida hat
Spruce root, paint. Diameter 15 inches, Height 8 inches. Lent by the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University. A whale is represented. (65628)
19. Coast Salish hat
Spruce root, pigment. Diameter 9¾ inches, Height 11 inches. Lent by the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University. A whaling scene is illustrated on this eighteenth century headpiece. (268)
20. Tlingit totem pole model
Wood, paint. Height 41 inches. Lent by the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University. (89014)
21. Kwakiutl shaman's rattle
Wood, paint, pebbles. Length 13 inches. Lent by the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University. On the underside a hawk is depicted. Above, a shaman is shown extracting poison from the mouth of a frog. (64045)
22. Kwakiutl sisiutl mask
Wood, paint, cedar bark. Length 80 inches. Lent by the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University. This is a figure of sisiutl, a double-headed serpent with a human head in the middle. To look upon the creature brought death to the viewer, and its powers were often used to benefit warriors and hunters. (87206)
23. Tlingit rattle
Copper, abalone shell inlay, wood, leather, pebbles. Length 8⅝ inches. Lent by the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University. A bear is represented. (62984)
24. Tlingit dagger
Wood, iron, abalone shell inlay, leather, string. Length 21½ inches. Lent by the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University. A killer whale is shown above a human face. (2170)
25. Tlingit canoe model
Wood, paint. Length 46 inches. Lent by the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University. This hawk-

prowed model was carved from a single piece of wood. At a potlatch the generosity of the host was exemplified by giving each guest a "canoe-load" of food. (1243)

26. Tlingit basket

Spruce root with reed trim. Height 9½ inches. Bowdoin College Museum of Art. (1944.26.4)

27. Tlingit basket

Spruce root with reed trim. Height 10 inches. Bowdoin College Museum of Art. (1944.26.1)

28. Kwakiutl theatrical screen fragment

Wood, paint, mica. Height 47¾ inches. Lent by the Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago. This piece is part of a larger screen used during the winter ceremonials. It would appear and disappear by being raised and lowered by attendants, and flashes from the firelight would be reflected by the mica. The flattened forms of the hindpaws and the abstraction of other anatomical parts indicate the priority of the graphic surface in this representation of a bear. (19884)

29. Haida box drum

Wood, paint. Height 41¼ inches. Lent by the Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago. During winter ceremonial activities this object was suspended from a house beam and a percussion rhythm was beaten by the heels of a drummer who sat above it. The large forepaws, flared nostrils, and protruding tongue identify the creature as a bear, whose stomach contains a beaver, characterized by the cross-hatched tail. (18626)

Photographs by Edward S. Curtis

Special Collections, Hawthorne-Longfellow Library.

These photographs are selections from Volumes 9, 10 and 11 of Curtis' life work, *The North American Indian*.

Cowichan Girl and A Haida of Massett illustrated on page four and five.

Photographs by Adelaide de Menil

Collection of the artist. These photographs, taken between 1966 and 1968, record the neglect and decay which has overtaken the monumental sculpture of the Northwest Coast.

