

## Northwest Introduction



Rattle



Makah Basket



Transformation Mask

The Northwest Coast region is a strip of land, less than 150 miles wide, that extends from the Alaskan Panhandle to present-day northern California. Mountains run the length of this land, which is broken up by numerous inlets and islands formed by offshore mountains. This temperate coastal area was so rich in natural resources that the development of agriculture was unnecessary.

Six different linguistic groups existed within the Northwest Coast region. Fishing was the basis of their early economy. The Nootka people of Vancouver Island and British Columbia and their Makah neighbors to the south specialized in whaling. Farther North, the Haida and Kwakiutl (kwakeyUTI) people built their economy upon the abundant salmon, which could literally be picked from the water during spawning.



The wealthy Native people of the Northwest Coast developed complex social and religious systems and acquired remarkable artistic skills. Men were particularly noted for their carving skills and women for weaving. Although many ceremonial and religious objects were created, most objects were made for the express purpose of proclaiming the wealth and status of important families. The most famous of the many Northwest Coast art forms is the totem pole. Bearing animal crests, the carved totem stood before a planked house in a seaside village, proclaiming the ancestry of its owners.

### **The Potlatch**

Although everyone participated in the accumulation of wealth, the principal property owners among the Northwest Coast people were chiefs and nobles. These wealthy people were obligated to give away their material goods in elaborate ceremonies called potlatches, which were held in the winter to celebrate a special event, like a wedding or birth. The measure of a man's prestige in Northwest Coast society was the quantity of possessions he had to give away. But the potlatch was more than an opportunity to display wealth and enhance one's status. It was also a means of redistributing wealth within a stratified society.

### **The Development of Ceremony and Art**

Art objects play a central role in Northwest Coast spiritual practices and ceremonies. Images of animals on works of art represented social groups known as clans. A clan was composed of two or more family groups. Each clan had its own special animal and traced its right to represent the animal to an ancestor who had once made a covenant with it. An animal image not only identified the clan's heritage but also evoked spiritual protection in return for respect and proper ceremony. Animals were



Haida  
Totem Pole, after 1850  
wood, malacite, pigments  
Gift of George Rickey,  
Minneapolis Institute of Arts,  
97.169.1

not worshipped as deities, but rather viewed as spiritual manifestations of nature whose protection could be sought. The most important animals were ravens, bears, beavers, wolves, whales, and eagles, but nearly every animal known to the Northwest Coast people appeared in their art.

Northwest Coast style is highly sophisticated, characterized by bold line and outlines. The complex designs often appear tightly contained within the shape of chests, spoons, pipes, baskets, blankets, rattles, and masks. Animal forms are displayed on two-dimensional surfaces as if they have been split down the back and flattened to show all sides. This produces an image that is symmetrical and carefully rearranged so that all the parts fit the space. The beautifully executed images of Northwest Coast art are abstract and sophisticated, resulting in objects of great elegance.

### **Contact**

Russian traders were the first to come into contact with Northwest Coast peoples in the 1700s. By the end of the century, many settlers from the East had been attracted to the area by the prospect of trade. Iron-edged tools, acquired through trade, contributed to the wood carving skills of Native people, which reached a high point around the middle of the 1700s. Unfortunately, Europeans also introduced diseases that devastated the people. The U.S. and Canadian governments exerted additional pressures in an attempt to assimilate the Northwest Coast people into white culture. The continuance of tribal life was hindered when the potlatch was declared illegal by the Canadian government in 1884. The potlatch ban was repealed in 1951, but many aspects of traditional life had disappeared by that time.

### **Tribal Web Sites**

Haida (and Tlingit) web site: <http://www.tlingit-haida.org/>

Kwakiutl web site: <http://www.umista.org/main/>

Makah web site: <http://www.makah.com/>

# Rattle

## KEY IDEAS

- Haida men of the Northwest Coast were accomplished carvers.
- The raven is an important figure in Northwest Coast stories, associated with stories of creation.

## Introduction

This rattle is shaped like a raven. A raven is identified in Northwest Coast art by its long, straight protruding beak. This rattle may have been used to emphasize important points in ceremonies. On the raven's back is a human figure, his tongue is joined to the beak of another bird, symbolizing communication between them and the close relationship between humans and Haida and Tlingit tribal web site:

<http://www.tlingit-haida.org/>

## Carving

Haida men were among the most accomplished carvers of the Northwest Coast. To make a rattle, the artist roughed out a piece of wood to an approximate shape. Then it was split down the middle and the interior was hollowed out. Several small stones were placed on the inside and the rattle was sewn together with spruce root. The outside was smoothed, painted and polished. The eyes of the raven are made of abalone, a sea mollusk whose shell is lined with mother-of-pearl.

Navajo tribal web site: <http://www.tlingit-haida.org/>

## Ravens

In Northwest Coast culture, ravens are the subjects of many stories that are associated with creation. In one story, Raven stole the sun from its hiding place and situated it in the heavens, establishing the universe we know today. Legend has it that a raven rattle once came to life while being used and flew away. The rattle would always be held upside down so that the bird could not fly away.



Haida  
Northwest Coast region (United States)  
Rattle, 19th-20th century  
Cedarwood, leather, abalone and haletosis shell  
The Christina N. and Swan J. Turnblad Memorial Fund  
75.55



## Makah Basket

### KEY IDEAS

- Whaling scenes were commonly woven into the designs of Northwest Coast baskets.

### Introduction

This trinket basket made by a Makah woman is decorated with a scene of whale hunting. The economy of both the Makah and Nootka people, who lived in the area of Vancouver Island off the Northwest Coast, was based on hunting whales. Meat, oil, and bone for all the people of a village came from whales.



Makah, Northwest Coast region  
(United States)  
Basket, 20th century  
Grass  
Gift of Stanley H. Brackett 75.13.2

*Whale, I have given you what you wish to get - my good harpoon. Please hold it with your strong hands... Whale, tow me to the beach of my village, for when you come ashore there, young men will cover your great body with blue-bill duck feathers and the down of the great eagle.*

- **Makah Tribble Song**

Makah tribal web site: <http://www.makah.com/>

### Whaling

The whale was as important to these people as the buffalo was to the Plains people, and it was treated with equal respect. Only the high-ranking men of the society could hunt whales, a very dangerous activity considering that whales can weigh as much as 40 tons. Before whaling, they conducted ceremonies to ensure the cooperation of the whale. As the harpooned whale was brought to shore, the whole village came to meet it and honor it as a guest.

### Materials

This basket is woven of different pattern flexible grasses wrapped around stiff vegetable stems. A circular pattern of ducks is woven into the cover of the basket and on sides, between the whaling scene. The base of the basket is made of cedar bark.





## Transformation Mask

### KEY IDEAS

- This mask refers to the Kwakiutl belief in the ability of animals and humans to transform into one another.
- Richard Hunt, the artist who made this mask, preserves traditional Kwakiutl practices in wood sculpture.

### Introduction

According to Kwakiutl creation stories, there once was a time when the only difference between birds, fish, animals and humans was their skin covering, and they all could transform themselves into other forms at will. Animals could become human and humans could become animals. These ideas still guide Kwakiutl religious traditions and make up the meaning of this Transformation mask. As part of a dance (view video of dance - access this video clip on the online version of Surrounded by Beauty: <http://www.artsmia.org/surrounded-by-beauty>) the mask is opened and closed, showing the transformation of humans and animals.

Kwakiutl tribal web site: <http://www.umista.org/main/>

### Transformation

The bird on the outside of this mask is a Raven. Raven is a central character in Northwest Coast Indian traditions. In many stories he is a creator of the world, but he can also be a "trickster" who plays mischievous tricks on others. Inside the mask is a two-headed serpent called Sisuitl (SEE-shoe), a powerful character who occasionally eats those who see him. That may explain why Sisuitl is shown in profile on the inside of the mask, looking away from the human head between his two heads. There is a human hand, palm up, on each side of the human face at the center of the mask. Together the images of human, raven and serpent on the mask refer to transformations taking place between these characters.

### The Artist

Richard Hunt is a contemporary Kwakiutl artist who comes from a family of artists. His grandfather taught his father, and his father taught Richard Hunt to create masks, rattles and bowls in the Kwakiutl tradition. Hunt made this Transformation Mask using traditional wood carving techniques and decorated the mask in the traditional colors of the Kwakiutl - black, red and green. In 1991 Hunt became the first native artist to be awarded the Order of British Columbia by the Canadian government. Hunt continues to carve wood in the Kwakiutl tradition, dances at many Kwakiutl ceremonies, and plays golf, soccer and basketball.

Kwakiutl tribal web site: <http://www.umista.org/main/>



Richard Hunt, Kwakiutl, born 1951  
Northwest Coast region (United States)  
Transformation Mask, 1993  
Cedar, pigment, cloth, string and wood  
The Anne and Hadlai Hall Fund, 93.42



Another view of the Transformation Mask

