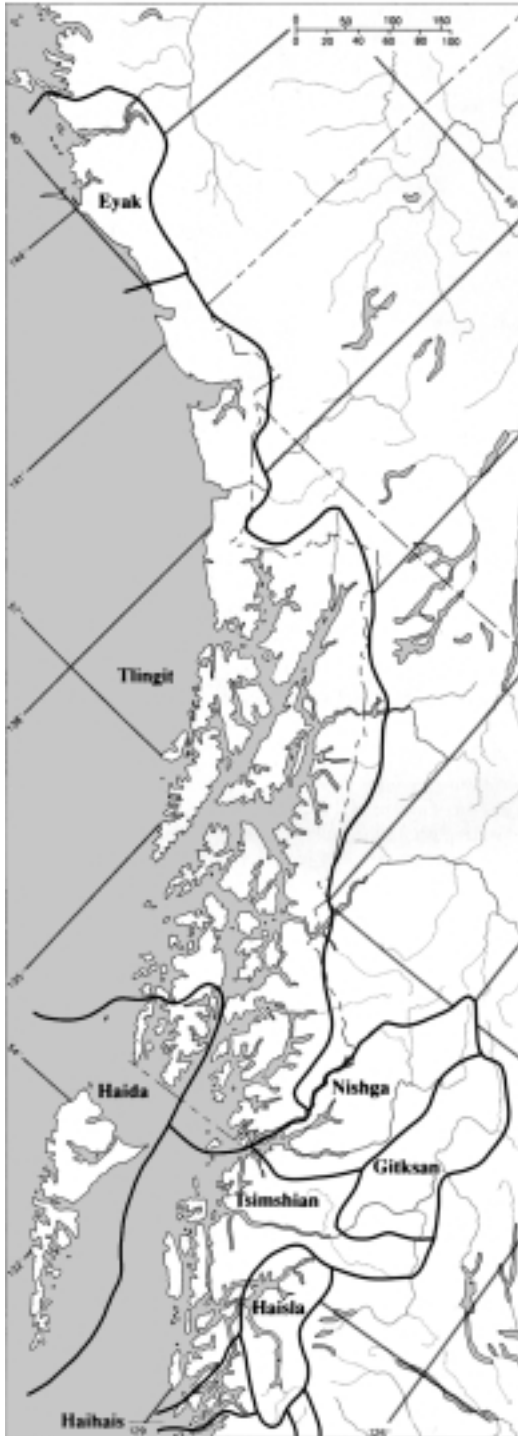


Northwest Coast Wood Sculpture



Tlingit carvers, Saxman, Alaska, 1939.



University of Missouri-Columbia
100 Swallow Hall
Columbia, MO 65211
573-882-3573
coas.missouri.edu/AnthroMuseum/

Totem Poles and House Posts



The bountiful environment of the Northwest Coast allowed development of a complex society of nobles, commoners, and slaves among native groups of the region. Wealth and status were expressed through elaborate ceremonies and a rich artistic tradition, particularly in the form of intricately carved and decorated wood sculpture.

Many Northwest Coast groups carve totem poles, which are often monuments proclaiming a family's status by recording its family tree. Families show their relationship to animal spirit beings such as ravens, wolves, bears, and eagles. Totem poles are also used for other purposes such as memorials to the dead.

The pole on display in the Museum is an example of a house post. House posts serve a functional purpose in helping to support the framework in the huge wooden houses built by many Northwest Coast groups. The posts generally portray lineage or clan emblems and are sometimes as intricately carved as the free-standing totem poles.

Halibut Hooks

These ingenious hooks are made for catching halibut, a large marine fish that can weigh hundreds of pounds. The hooks are made of two pieces of wood lashed together, a sharp metal barb, and an attached line. They are set in the water with the carved figure facing downward in order to entice the halibut to bite. Once hauled to the surface, the fish are stunned with wooden clubs so that their struggles don't upset the fishermen's canoe.



Northern Tlingit in ceremonial clothing, Klukwan, Alaska, 19th century.

Rattles

Northwest Coast groups often use carved rattles in traditional healing or spiritual ceremonies. The rattle on display here depicts a raven with a ball in its mouth. The ball represents the Sun, which the raven is releasing to light up the world.



Animal-Effigy Bowls

Wooden bowls carved to represent various animals, such as the bird-effigy bowls on display here, are found among many Northwest Coast groups. Similar types of bowls were traditionally used during potlatch ceremonies—status ceremonies that included lavish distribution of gifts from the hosts to their guests.



Tlingit

Many of the Northwest Coast items on display in the Museum were made by Tlingit peoples. At the time of first contact with Europeans in the 18th century, the Tlingit occupied nearly all of southeastern Alaska as well as portions of Canada. Today there are approximately 20,000 people who consider themselves Tlingit. Most Tlingit continue to live in Alaska, where they are now politically united with their tribal neighbors, the Haida. Although many live a modern lifestyle, Tlingit in some areas of Alaska and Canada continue to interact according to traditional customs and to depend on hunting, fishing, and gathering for subsistence and income.



Resources

Central Council, Tlingit & Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska [www.tlingit-haida.org].
Davis, Mary B. *Native America in the Twentieth Century*. Garland Publishing, 1996.
Murdoch, David. *North American Indian*. Eyewitness Books Series, Alfred A. Knopf, 1995.
Suttles, Wayne. *Handbook of North American Indians*, Vol. 7, *Northwest Coast*. Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990.

Credits

Cover Photo: Suttles, 1990 (p. 214, Fig. 7); Totem Pole: Murdoch, 1995 (p. 53); Tlingit Clothing: Suttles, 1990 (p. 215, Fig. 8); Halibut Hook: Suttles, 1990 (p. 211, Fig. 4); Rattle: Murdoch, 1995 (p. 54); Bowl: Murdoch, 1995 (p. 57).