

# DENVER ART MUSEUM

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DEPARTMENT OF INDIAN ART

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NORTHWEST-COAST INDIAN ART

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NORTHWEST COAST INDIANS

**1. INTRODUCTORY.** The first edition of this leaflet covered the area from the Chinook in the south to the Eskimo in the north. In this edition these extremes are not considered, not being truly members of the Northwest Coast group. The past tense is used because most of the culture described has gone. Space does not permit mention of which features of it still exist.

**2. TRIBES AND LOCATIONS.** Starting at the Canada-United States border on the Pacific coast the Northwest Coast tribes run north in the following order: a number of small tribes of the Salishan stock called by the general name Salish; \*Makah, Nootka and Kwakiutl, Wakashan stock; Bella Coola, Salishan stock; Haida—on the Queen Charlotte Islands—Skit-tagetan stock; a group of tribes of the Tsimshian stock; Tlinkit, Koluschan stock.

**3. POPULATION.** When first explored by Europeans the population was from 50,000 to 60,000. During the 19th century it rapidly decreased. Now the tribes number about 19,000 and appear to be increasing somewhat, except the Bella Coola. For details about population, see Leaflet 72.

**4. HABITAT.** The tribes inhabited the narrow beaches along the sea coast and banks of the large rivers at the foot of the towering mountain ranges on the mainland and the many islands off shore. The country was covered with great forests of immense trees, which flourished in the rather mild, rainy climate.

**5. CONTACT WITH WHITES** apparently began with the visits of the Russian, Bering, in 1741 and the Spanish under Perez in 1774. Spanish, English and French traders and explorers soon followed. The Americans came in the early 19th century. The fur trade, especially in sea otter, was the chief cause for these contacts. White influence had a disastrous effect on the Indians, vice and disease rapidly reducing the population. The native civilization tended to break down. On the other hand certain missionary and governmental agencies have done much good.

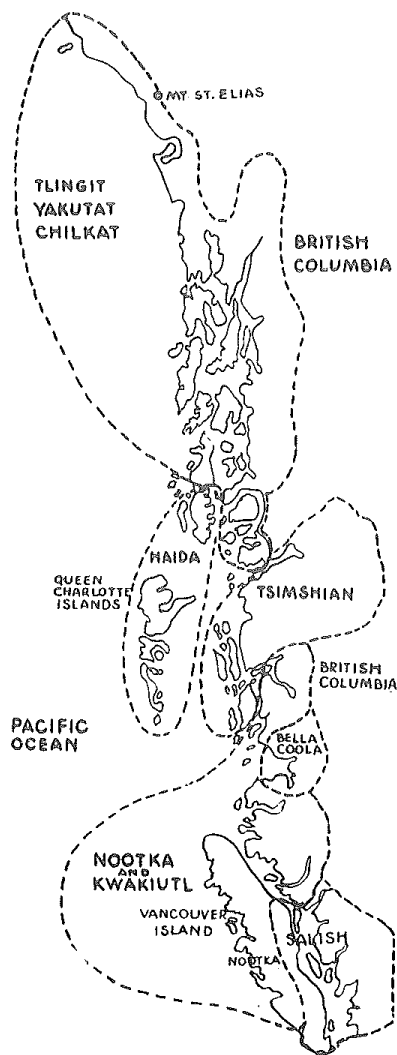
**6. PHYSIQUE.** In general these tribes are of relatively short stature and heavy build, with round heads and broad faces. For Indians they have an unusual amount of facial hair. There were two types of artificial head deformation. The Salish flattened the forehead. The Kwakiutl bound the head so that it assumed a long, conical shape.

**7. HOUSES AND VILLAGES.** Large houses, often containing several families, built of large, heavy hand hewn planks and beams and often having carved or painted fronts were grouped in the winter villages. The houses were oblong or

square, had a short side facing the water, and gable roofs. In the summer the people lived in small, temporary camps as they traveled about on food gathering expeditions.

**8. CLOTHING AND ORNAMENT.** Men wore only blankets or robes of shredded cedar bark, fur, or woven wool. Breech cloths were not used. Women wore only aprons of shredded cedar bark in good weather, adding blankets or short capes during cold or storm. Blankets of cedar bark were the most common. Moccasins were very uncommon, barefeet being the rule. Broad brimmed, conical hats of cedar bark were worn. The women tied tight bands around the ankles. Skin shirts, leggings, and boots were used to some extent by the far northern tribes. For ceremonial dress cape-blankets—the so-called Chilkat blanket—shirts and leggings of mountain goat wool were used, especially in the north. Chiefs wore elaborate headdresses of carved wood, trimmed with shell, sea lion whiskers and ermine. Today ordinary commercial clothing is largely used. The men wore ear and nose pendants of wood, feathers, shell and metal. They oiled their bodies and sprinkled them with red ochre, mica and shiny sand. White bird down was scattered over the hair. The women of the northern tribes slit the lower lip and inserted a piece of wood called a labret. The Haida practiced elaborate tattooing.

\*The Makah are part of the Nootka and live on Cape Flattery, Washington, which is not shown on the map.



9. **FOOD** was obtained largely from the sea and the large rivers. Salmon, cod, halibut and olachen were taken with hooks, nets, spears and traps. Porpoise, seal and whale were captured by harpooning, the whale only by the Nootka. Herring spawn, olachen oil and shell fish were important foods. Very few land animals were eaten. Birds and eggs were favorite foods. Vegetal food was supplied by berries, roots and sea weed. There was no agriculture. Much food of all kinds was dried or otherwise preserved for winter use. There was always an abundance of food.

Food was cooked by roasting or broiling and by boiling in wooden boxes and water-tight baskets by dropping in red hot stones.

10. **BASKETRY.** Among the Tlinkit and Haida baskets, largely pail-shaped, were made by plain twining of split spruce roots and decorated by false embroidery with colored grasses. The southern tribes made baskets of cedar bark in plain and fancy checker weaves. Twined openwork carrying baskets were also made in the south. The southern baskets had squarish deep shapes. Mats of cedar bark in checker weaves were very common everywhere. For further details about basketry, see Leaflets 58, 67 and 68.

11. **WEAVING.** The Salish tribes made blankets of mountain goat wool, the hair of a special breed of dog, feathers, or fireweed cotton, the first material being by far the most common. There were two types, a coarse white goat wool blanket in a checker weave for ordinary use and a much finer type with elaborate colored patterns made in various twined weaves for the use of the nobles. Both were made on a vertical loom with horizontal top and bottom roller bars. See Leaflet 59-60.

The northern tribes, especially the Chilkat division of the Tlinkit, made blankets, shirts, aprons and leggings of goat wool. They had animal designs of the characteristic Northwest Coast type executed in black, green, yellow and white. A blanket is shown on the cover. They are made on a simple upright weaving frame, with loose warps of mixed wool and cedar bark, in various twined technics.

12. **DYES** for wool: black, hemlock bark; green, copper; yellow, wolf moss, *Evernia vulpina*. Dyes for basketry: black, soaking in mud, salt water boiled with hemlock bark; purple, two shades from two kinds of huckleberry, *Vaccinium membranaceum* and *Vaccinium ovalifolium*; red, alder bark and wood, *Alnus Oregona*, nettle, *Urtica Lyallii*, and hemlock bark, *Tsuga heterophylla*; yellow, wolf moss, *Evernia vulpina*; greenish-blue, hemlock bark and copper oxide. Aniline dyes were introduced toward the end of the 19th century and have largely replaced the native dyes. See Leaflet 71.

13. **CARVING** in wood was the outstanding art of the region, especially in the north. Stone and jade tools were used before the introduction of metal by Europeans in the late 18th century. Spoons, boxes, chests and dishes of all sizes, weapons and tools, rattles, ceremonial paraphernalia and masks, canoes, and totem poles were the principal objects carved from wood. Many of these articles were painted. Numerous small objects were carved from bone, horn, shell and stone in human, animal and eccentric forms. Mask making reached great heights. There were hundreds of different kinds, mostly elaborately carved and painted. For additional details about masks, see Leaflet 65-66.

Much skill was shown in forming all four sides of boxes from single planks. The plank was cut partially through in three places and bent into a square after steaming. The ends were sewn together and the whole attached to the bottom by spruce root stitches sunk in grooves or passing through holes.

14. **METALWORK.** Copper, either native or imported, was used to a considerable extent. Large shield-like objects, called "coppers," were the chief product of this industry. They were symbols of wealth and in trading and gift-giving often attained tremendous values. Copper was also used for decorating iron knives and for rattles and personal ornaments. Brass and iron wire were twisted into bracelets. Sheet silver bracelets, carved with totemic designs, were made.

†15. **TOTEM POLES** reached their greatest development in the mid-19th century. The carvings on them represent two things: life forms which are the heraldic crests of the owner's family; or illustrations of mythological adventures. Large carved monuments are also raised in memory of the dead. Originally the totem poles were attached to the fronts of houses, but later were moved to a position before the dwellings. There were differences in size and decoration among the various tribes. Totem poles had nothing to do with religion.

16. **DESIGN STYLE.** All designs in this region, except those on basketry, were based on bird, animal and fish forms and were largely curvilinear, asymmetric curves being the rule. In order to depict all sides of an animal on a flat surface a system of dissection was invented, by which highly conventionalized drawings of parts of animal bodies were spread out in symmetrical arrangements. The blanket on the cover illustrates the style. Basket designs were angular geometrical abstractions.

17. **TRAVEL** was almost entirely by water so canoe building reached a very high level. There were two types used respectively in the north and south. Both were dug out of single logs, though the upper portions of bows and sterns were sometimes separate pieces.

†For additional details see Leaflet 79-80.

The largest canoes were sometimes 60 to 80 feet long and were capable of long ocean voyages. Sails were used to some extent.

**18. WARFARE** for revenge and slave raiding was common. Forts were built to defend towns against raiders. The use of armor made of thick hides or of wooden slats was a peculiar feature of this culture. The chief weapons were knives and clubs, though spears and bow and arrow were also used.

**19. GAMES.** The most popular game involved the guessing by a person or side of the location of a marked stick concealed by the opponent. The guessing was based on the expression of the opponent's face. Dice games, shooting at a mark and quoits were other games. Cat's cradles were made. Gambling was common and heavy.

**20. CUSTOMS.** Wealth and pride of family were the two strongest influences in this society. There were three classes of society, nobles, commoners and slaves, and family groups of many persons believed to be descended from a common ancestor. The heads of the most important families in a village or area were ruling chiefs. In the north the tribes were divided into two or four groups, members of any one of which must marry into another group. In the north descent was through the mother, and in the south either through the father or through both sides. Marriages were arranged by the parents and accompanied by gift giving. In the north the dead were burned, while the southern tribes laid their dead in trees or on high platforms, a canoe often being the coffin. Slavery was very common. The potlatch, or gift giving ceremony, was universal. At these feasts the host would give away nearly everything he possessed, thus gaining great prestige. An elaborate system of borrowing and interest paying existed. Hospitality was stressed.

**21. RELIGION.** Various rather vague, faraway gods were believed to exist, but received little attention. The active religious beliefs and actions of the tribes had to do with the idea that all animals, birds, fishes—especially the larger ones—and even inanimate objects in nature, such as rocks and trees, were powerful and immortal beings, almost divine spirits, who must be propitiated and controlled by various ceremonial practices and the use of offerings and taboos. The more important religious practices were under the management of shamans, or medicine-men, who also had powers as doctors and magicians. But individuals conducted their own private religious rites also. There was a belief in the soul and its future life in various rather uninviting heavens.

The most striking religious practices were the great dramatic ceremonies and spectacles conducted in special large buildings during the winter months. A large number of masked figures, believed to be temporarily occupied by spirits, acted out various myths to the accompaniment of singing and the noise of drums, rattles and large wooden whistles. These ceremonies were usually conducted by secret societies, especially in the south. The initiation of neophytes was the chief activity in the dances.

**Compiled from the following sources by F. H. Douglas:**

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