

Notes-CROOKED BEAK OF HEAVEN

The Indians of the Northwest Coast (from Vancouver Island to the north of Seattle in British Columbia, Canada, to the Seattle area and beyond, to Oregon to the south) had a very rare pairing: an adaptation as hunters & gatherers, which is normally associated with small-scale band societies, yet cultural achievements of a high order. They were lucky to occupy an area of the "salmon runs" (the salmon spend their adult lives in the ocean but then enter the fresh water rivers they were born in to spawn and die). The yearly "salmon run" let the Indians build up enough food surplus (if you like smoked salmon on your bagel with cream cheese thank the Northwest Coast Indians!) to let them achieve a complex chiefdom society without agriculture! These peoples, like the Haida and the Kwakiutl, included elaborate chiefdoms with complex social ranks and elaborate associated art & technology.

Potlatch-today we associate these Indians with an elaborate form of "**competitive feasting**" called the "potlatch". This was a rank society in which people who wanted to rise in their society and attain a higher rank

symbolized by animal-icon "crests" (like Western "Coats of Arms"), like the Raven or the Wolf. They sponsored a kind of feast, a form of "egalitarian redistribution", where the sponsors did not keep the goods but, instead, invited rival clans, fed them and challenged them to a "fight with property", the **Potlatch**. As their society was hit by Western diseases and acculturation, high-ranking people died, thus opening "slots" in the social structure, leading to lower-ranking people competing for the positions, this led to an orgy of property destruction that baffled

Westerners. Remember, the 19th century, in which this occurred, was the time of early capitalism, where the "price" of economic goods was very important as a determinator of value and there was the cultural value of "saving", the need to accumulate "capital" to invest & become rich. Here,

Indians were acquiring mounds of Western goods through the "Fur Trade" (the cuddly Sea Otter was nearly driven to extinction for its pelt, as were beavers, muskrats & other fur-bearing animals), such as Hudson Bay blankets, copper pots, etc. The goal was to challenge one's rivals by destroying property and then requiring him to match it, that is, rip up the blankets, smash and throw the pots into the sea, etc. If he could not, he lost and the winner ascended a rank and thus gave the crests as hereditary rights to his descendants. They were converting "wealth" into

"power and authority" (something that Ross Perot would understand better than a J.P. Morgan). Thus, on both sides of the border, the Whites thought the Indians were crazy and prohibited the potlatch. Mounties and American police raided potlatches, stole the art and filled up our museums with the wonderful "coppers", blankets and wood carvings, as a kind of "booty". The Indians took

this, rightly, as a direct attack on their cultural identity & way of life (this was the time of forced "assimilation" in North American relations with Native Americans, kidnapping their children and taking them to boarding schools like that of Carlisle just to the north of us in Pennsylvania to turn them into good White People). Northwest Coast Indians comment upon this in the film (note the back-drop painter's comments) and are presently in court trying to get their masks and other sacred items back.

Happy "Accidents" of Nature-This is a land of deep fjords (drowned river valleys) covered in pine forest (the world's rare temperate "Rain Forests" are found here on the Olympic Peninsula) with huge stands of red & white cedar, which is not only soft & easy to carve, but also has a natural insecticide & hence is still prized for lawn furniture because it resists termites & the fungi that cause rotting in this wet environment (remember the jokes about all the rain in Seattle).

Totem Poles=These woods made possible the **largest wooden sculpture in the world**, the famous "Totem Poles" (and you see one being carved & transported). The superimposed animals are **totems**, that is, mythic Dawn Ancestors, who represent specific clans & titles.

Giant Wooden Houses with Painted Façades=Americans were most impressed with the huge log houses made by the Northwest Coast Indians, and you see the remains of one at the beginning of the film. There, cozy in the winter, people conducted their **Winter Ceremonials**, dancing with masks drums & rattles (the primary instruments of Native Americans, along with flutes). Northwest coast villages had whole rows of these huts with big painted façades decorated with **iconic** animal art, almost like the main streets of Western towns (minus the art, of course).

Huge War Canoes=These were a warlike people who used wooden armor & helmets, clubs and spears. They took slaves & sacrificed them in a form of "conspicuous consumption"; often killing slaves & using them as rollers to haul their huge carved & decorated war canoes onto the beach! Such powerful chiefs encourage art for self-glorification while supporting artists as full-time occupational specialists", a characteristic of advanced chiefdoms & states.

Tools Needed for Art=Another "happy accident" was the early exposure to Whites (here Russian fur trappers from Siberia; Russia once occupied this part of North America!), who early traded in iron & steel tools, the metal tools made carving much easier thus made totem poles bigger & more complex and the huge wooden houses also easier to make.

Subsistence Base for Full-Time Occupational Specialists=You see professional

wood-carvers at work. These contrast with the **village specialists** found in typical tribal society (simply someone better than everyone else in a craft, but one who still has to engage, like everyone else, in the subsistence quest) in that they don't have to hunt or fish but are supported to do their carving. Hence they can have more time for training & practice and become more skilled. Northwest Coast Indian crafts are, in fact, the most elaborate in North America.

Theme & Variations ("In-Jokes")=You see the famous Northwest Coast carver Bill Reid explain his silver bracelet. Each artist seeks creativity, not by inventing a new style as we would have it, but by running subtle "variations" (their own unique versions) on traditional "themes" (motifs or the subject matter of the art), rather like classical Western composers and musicians, who run variations on the themes of previous composers (or modern singers who do distinctive "covers" of someone else's song). This explains why traditional art "all looks alike" to us, but is easily distinguished by the people who make and appreciate it ("emic" versus "etic" perception). This means that people understand "in-jokes", that is, one expects both sides of a bracelet or a wooden box to have the same designs. They do look similar, but if you study them closely you will find that each design differs in all its elements from its counterparts! It is an illusion, a kind of "joke" or "pun" that can only be understood by the initiated.

Style=Just as a language cannot use all the "phones" possible, so too an art style cannot use all the formal elements of art. Each system is a **selection** from a **total range of possibilities**. Like a system, it is productive, having duality of patterning, that is, rules of composition added to the elements of style. A particular "style" is thus a unique, or **recognizable**, selection of the "elements of design" ("design elements") and the "rules of composition" ("design rules"). It is evocative of a specific **people**, a specific **place** and a specific **time** (as we use based on decades of American popular culture, as in "Music of the 50s". "Fashion", or the specific form that styles take over time, is not synonymous with "style". That is, a given style may go thru many different "fashions", fleeting expressions of the style built on previous fashions & only recognizable "after the fact". The 1960s "hippys" were unaware they had a "style", but modern people, looking back, can dress exactly in their style down to long hair, bare feet and tie-dye shirts!

Ethnic Art Style=peoples who co-exist in a specific "culture-geographical area", like the Northwest Coast, will have different, but related styles. If they are non-literate cultures, we call this "ethnic art" (it used to be called "primitive art", but, obviously, that was an ethnocentric term). Thus, the Kwakiutl had typical

Northwest Coast elements, but painted their totem poles in bright, garish colors, while the Haida left theirs unpainted, thus we can distinguish between the two.

First Use of Cinematography in Anthropology=Fortunately for us, the Northwest Coast peoples persisted into the time in which the first hand-cranked B&W movie cameras existed. Edward Curtis, an early American ethnographer, was the first to use them to record costumed dancers (as bears & eagles) dancing on their huge war canoes. This clip was later used by the popular band "The Doors" in the 1960s in their movie video! Movies are now an important sub-discipline of anthropology, "visual anthropology", and are still used for research.

Coppers=The Northwest Coast Indians knew only how to beat soft metals, like copper, into shape, not how to melt them, blacksmith them or cast them (this beating is called "cold hammering"). The result was a large flat plaque, or "copper", that had elaborate carved designs on it and was a lineage & clan heirloom. It is an example of a "valuable" (not money) as we will later explain for Melanesian "shell money", or kina, as the Wormsley book shows you. These "special purpose" valuables are often characteristic of traditional society. In a potlatch one could even cut up one's treasured "copper" and throw it into the sea as a part of the "fight with property" (one's rival then had to do the same with his valuable, or lose the contest). Today, these rare objects are treasured museum pieces.

Transformation Masks=The Indians of the Northwest Coast, like the Kwakiutl, had elaborate carved and painted wooden masks, which you see worn by raven (a large crow) dancers in the film. These masks had hinged faces. By pulling hidden strings the actor could, in an instant, open the 2 halves of the visible face to reveal a second, hidden face inside. Thus he "transformed" into another creature just as birds could mythically change into people or people into bears. This is a common notion of such a "shamanic" society, where people regard animals as sacred kin (rather like what you saw in the narrators of Yanomamö myth talking about "Grandfather Cayman", a kind of alligator-man in the film "A Man Called Bee". We will know these religions as the oldest and simplest human religion, something we will call "Animism" (a term first coined by E.B. Tylor--the same English anthropologist who coined the modern definition of "culture"). It is a belief that all things are "animated", alive, a kind of "nature worship".

Ethnic Identity & Cultural Revival=You also saw how modern Indians use their art to try & preserve their cultural identity, that is, remain "Indian" in a White Man's world. Even modern North American culture recognizes the value & beauty of this art by commissioning totem poles for municipalities or putting them in front of libraries to heighten the regional sense of place for tourism. Much of the present

sense of the American Northwest, a place like Seattle (named after old chief "Seattle", a Northwest Coast Indian), is Northwest Coast Amerindian art.