

TOWARDS AN ART HISTORY OF
NORTHWEST COAST FIRST NATIONS:1. *“Traditional” Period (1770-1870)*

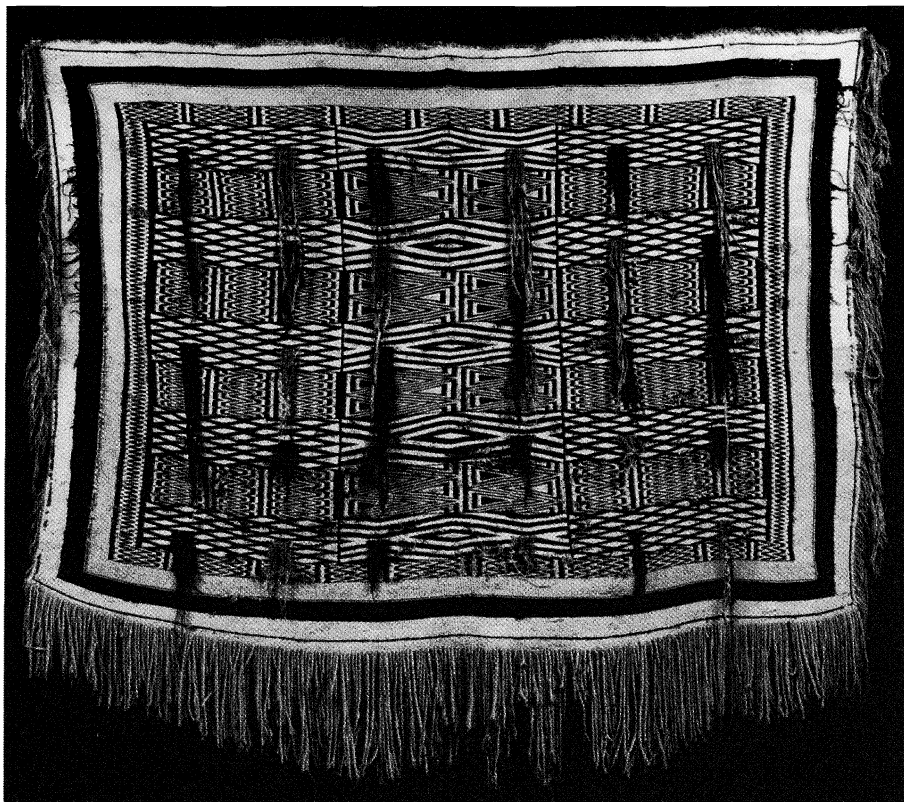
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Over thousands of years, the First Nations of the Northwest Coast – living in what is now the coastal areas of Alaska, British Columbia, and Washington – developed distinctive and sophisticated art styles. These were maritime peoples who travelled in great canoes to and from their homes along the rivers and ocean beaches. They took their subsistence principally from the annual runs of salmon and other sea creatures, and supplemented it with berries and plants. Their technology was based on the wood and bark of the cedar tree, which, among other things, supplied the material for their large multi-family plank houses. These were stratified, wealth-conscious societies, and much of their art was created for ceremonial display at potlatch feasts. Much of it was covered with emblematic animal designs, which were inherited and owned as ancestral privileges. These utilitarian and ceremonial functions stimulated the creation of a characteristic graphic style, based on a swelling and tapering “formline” of primary black lines, secondary red areas, and tertiary patches of blue-green. Sculpturally, Northwest Coast artists created a wide range of spectacular masks for ceremonial performance as well as such monumental forms as houses, totem poles, and canoes.

These art styles had reached a high point by the time of European contact in the 1770s. To label the century that followed a “traditional” period is a fiction because, of course, all cultures are traditional in the sense that they consist of a cumulative handing down of shared forms and meanings. Like all cultural components, art styles are both continuous and changing. When trying to understand those Northwest Coast artifacts that have come down to us, it may be useful, however, to define “traditional” from an external perspective; that is, to define

it as the time between first European contact to the beginning of systematic anthropological artifact collection in the 1870s. The competing cultural claims for these territories – from Spain, England, France, Russia, and the United States – would ultimately be resolved around 1870 as the Northwest Coast region, and its Aboriginal inhabitants, become incorporated into the nation-states of Canada and the United States.

During this first century of Euro-North American collecting, Northwest Coast First Nations made important cultural and artistic changes in the objects they created. Yet these changes were relatively minor compared to those that occurred later; indeed, many objects dating from this period reveal little cross-cultural influence. As early as circa 1815, however, the production and trade of tourist art was thriving, consisting most notably of a range of portable argillite sculptures made by the Haida. Argillite is a distinctive black (or, more rarely, red) shale indigenous to the Queen Charlotte Islands (Haida Gwaii). Objects from these earliest collections, generally preserved in Europe and New England, offer us our best insights into the nature of art styles developed over centuries of isolation.

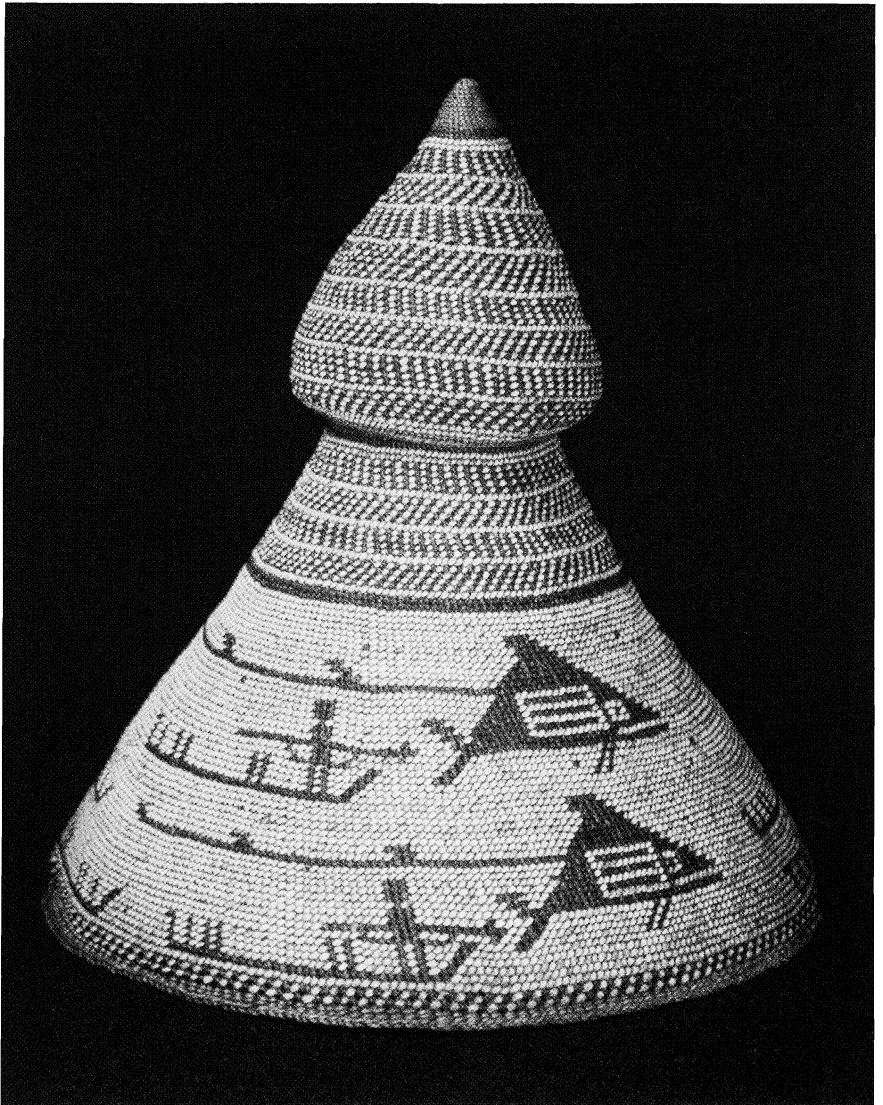


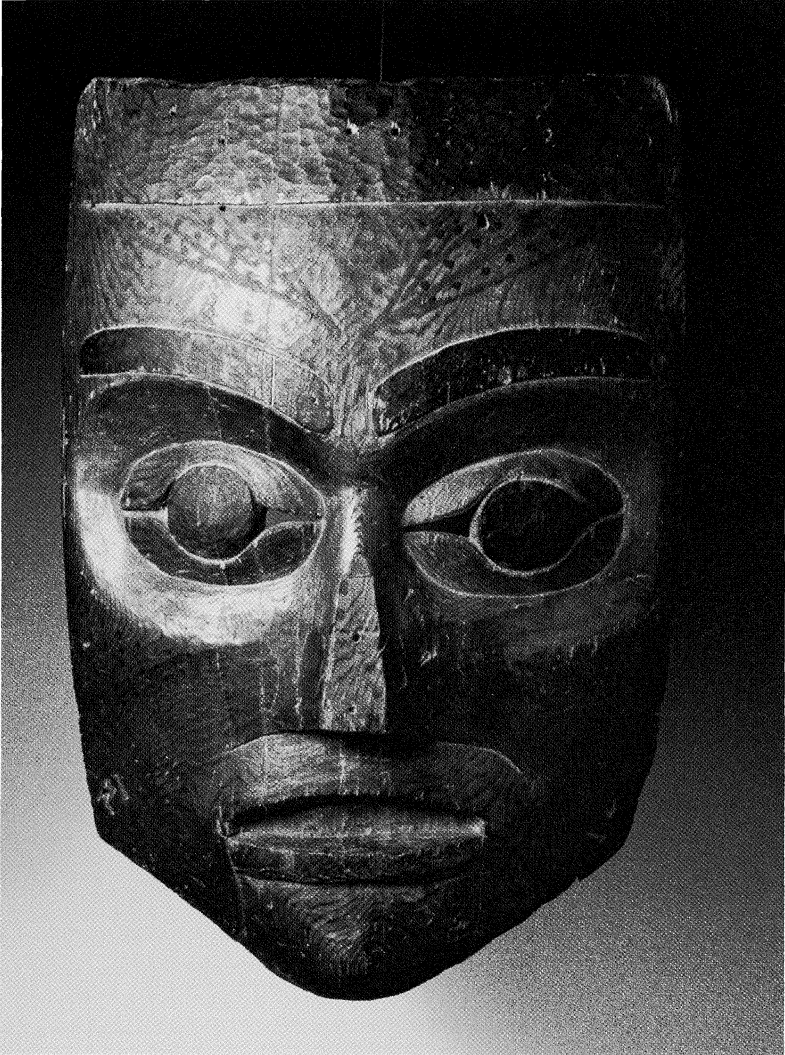
Blanket, Tlingit. Southeast Alaska; collected 1778. Mountain goat wool and otter fur; 41 3/4 x 57 in. Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology (Kunstkamera) of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Saint Petersburg (no. 2520-7).

The weaving in this type of blanket is known today as “raven’s tail” because of the motif of pendant black yarns that resembles the tail of this bird. Most of these blankets date from the eighteenth century and the very beginning of the nineteenth century. They are extremely rare: only eleven complete examples still exist, though fragmentary sections of about four others have been discovered and identified. They are much admired due to their complex method of creation, no longer used today, involving a variety of weaving techniques. This style of weaving evidently was overshadowed by the development of Chilkat-style weaving, which includes closely related as well as additional techniques that allow the making of the circular and curvilinear forms so characteristic of the two-dimensional painting styles of the northern Northwest Coast. After the Tlingit weavers mastered the Chilkat-style techniques, they stopped producing robes in the “raven’s tail” style. In recent years, a large number of weavers have taken up these dormant techniques and are once again producing robes and other kinds of woven regalia for ceremonial use. (Brown 2000, 120, pl. 81)

Whaler's basketry hat, Nuu-chah-nulth (Nootka). West coast of Vancouver Island, British Columbia; collected ca. 1775-92. Quills and vegetable fiber; 11 7/8, height; 11 7/8 in., diameter. Museo de América, Madrid (no. 13570).

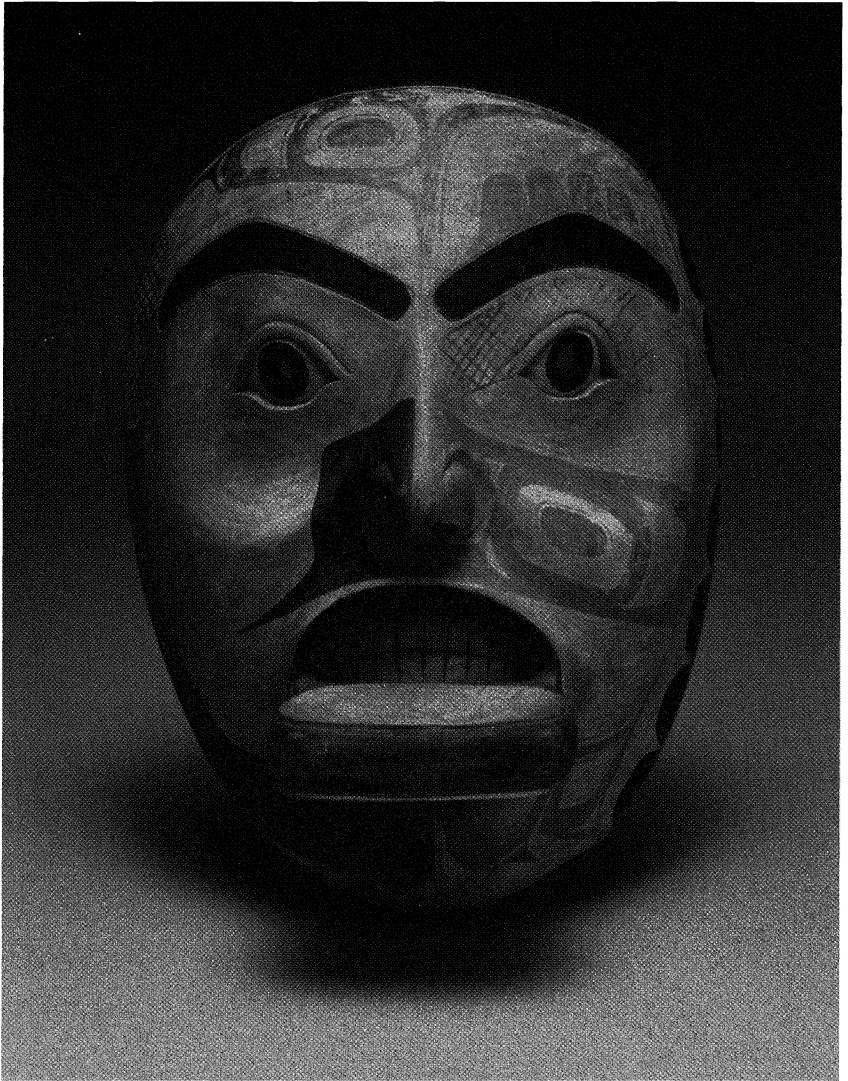
The designs woven in this hat depict a whale hunt, which was a pursuit with a strong ritual and spiritual foundation. This type of hat was reserved for the chiefs of lineages with hereditary rights to the whaling traditions. This type of hat confirmed the status of the wearer, referred to the rituals that preceded the hunt, and served as propitiatory objects. This particular hat was probably collected at Nookta by José Mariano Mociño, a naturalist who traveled with Juan de la Bodega y Quadra's 1792 expedition. It is like those described by Mociño himself and by the commanders of the schooners *Sutil* and *Mexicana*. Similar hats are worn by chief Maquinna, chief Tetaku, and others in drawings made by various illustrators who formed part of the Alejandro Malaspina expedition. (Brown 2000, 72, pl. 24)





Large mask, Nuu-chah-nulth (Nootka). West coast of Vancouver Island, British Columbia; collected 1792. Painted wood; 27 1/2 x 19 5/8 in. Museo de América, Madrid (no. 13919).

This large mask of a human face is made from a single piece of wood, though it once had another piece attached at the top of the nose. When the Spaniards first reached this part of the world, they did not describe in their journals the totem poles that are now emblematic of this area because they did not exist. Instead, large masks were displayed in the homes of distinguished members of the community, alluding to the lineages of the inhabitants. This mask ... was collected in 1792 by José Mariano Mociño, a naturalist who was a member of the Juan de la Bodega y Quadra expedition. (Brown 2000, 64, pl. 13)



Human face mask, Kaigani Haida, ca. 1820. Kasaan, southeast Alaska; collected ca. 1821-25. Painted wood; length, 26 cm. Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts (no. E3483).

Around the year 1820, a Haida master carver created a series of masks, of which a dozen or so have survived into the present. Haida people wore masks like these for ceremonial and ritual purposes ... At the time these masks were made, a trade in sea otter pelts flourished between Haida people and American sailors, and several of the masks changed hands. The new owners were young men on a great adventure. For them the masks represented *their* experience. They preferred masks

that showed a woman wearing a prominent lip-distending labret, as that was a cultural feature they found particularly exotic and wished to illustrate to their own people back home ... Though described as “hideous,” “vile,” “ridiculous,” and “disgusting,” labrets were clearly the most intriguing aspect of Haida culture encountered by the young men visiting there on American ships. This fascination, often voiced, may be what led to the production of masks of labret-wearing women for the souvenir market ...

That so many similar pieces would be collected over a time period of at least twenty years and over a stretch of coastline eight hundred miles long (at locations as distant as Prince of Wales Island, on the coast of Alaska, and the Columbia River) is evidence that they were widely traded and that the subject matter held a powerful fascination. The two examples that first entered museum collections in Massachusetts were each described as portraits of a particular woman. The one collected by Captain Daniel Cross on the 1821 to 1825 voyage of the Boston brig *Rob Roy* [illustrated here] is described in various East India Marine Society records as a “wooden Mask, a correct likeness of a distinguished Chieftainess at Nootka Sound,” an “Indian mask, representing the features of an aged female of the Casern [Kasaan] tribe on the N.W. Coast of America,” and a “Wooden Mask, once used by a distinguished Chieftainess of the Indians at Nootka Sound – said to represent exactly the manner in which she painted her face” ... Artifacts were often collected at a distance from the place where they were produced because they were regularly exchanged between tribes or as barter goods in the maritime fur trade with Americans and Europeans ... This resulted not only in the wide distribution of objects across regions and cultures, but also in the frequent misattribution of their original sources and cultural contexts. (Malloy 2000, xi, 12-13, 44, cf. 73, 80, object no. 46)