

TOWARDS AN ART HISTORY OF
NORTHWEST COAST FIRST NATIONS:*2. Transitional Period (1870-1930)*IRA JACKNIS

For the First Nations of British Columbia, the fifty years spanning the turn of the twentieth century marked a period of tremendous social and cultural change. Some of these developments were destructive, such as the drastic decline in populations (as much as 90 per cent) due primarily to smallpox and other diseases. Traders, missionaries, and government agents worked to undermine traditional practices, and this culminated in 1884 with the Canadian Parliament's banning of the vital potlatch ceremony. Still, First Nations of the province resisted: potlatching and ceremonialism continued among many groups, especially the Kwakwaka'wakw and the Gitksan. And some of the changes were creative. Art styles increasingly incorporated Western trade materials such as silver, woolen cloth, and commercial paints, which yielded novel and challenging forms. An expansion in the scale and scope of coastal carvings was made possible by metal-tipped tools and trade-based wealth. Finally, this period witnessed the beginning of systematic collection on the part of museum anthropologists as well as the production of artifacts for sale to tourists and collectors.

This shift in audience reflected a gradual change in the role of the artist on the Northwest Coast. Traditionally, masters were specifically commissioned to create monumental works of art. Although these artists were always known and highly regarded among their own groups, it is only those of the transitional period who are now remembered by name. The most famous of these is Charles Edenshaw (ca. 1839-1920), one of a community of northern Haida masters. Recent research has allowed us to discern individual hands in their surviving works. Among the Kwakwaka'wakw, Charlie James (ca. 1870

-1938), in addition to producing dance masks and totem poles, is significant for having created works (especially model totem poles) for a non-Aboriginal audience. Because it was erected in Vancouver's Stanley Park, one of his distinctive pairs of thunderbird house posts became a dominant symbol of Aboriginal presence in British Columbia.

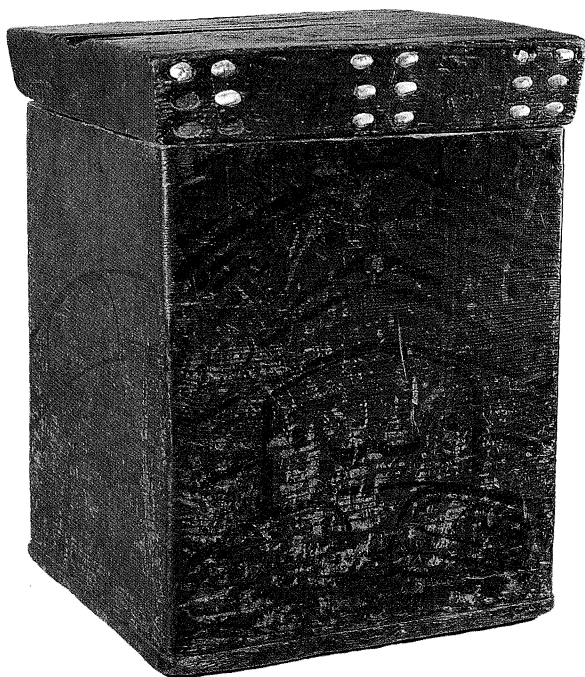
A comparable Heiltsuk master is Captain Richard Carpenter (1841-1931), whose work is illustrated here. Like many artists of the period, his work was unsigned, and it is only recently that attempts have been made to isolate and identify his oeuvre. A high-ranking chief, Carpenter worked as an artist and renowned boat builder for most of his life. In 1900, when he was almost sixty years old, he became a lighthouse keeper at Waglisla, where he was encountered by several collectors. Captain Carpenter made a wide range of forms, including canoes, paddles, boxes, and seats. It was masters such as Edenshaw, James, and Carpenter who laid the foundation for later artists, who increasingly created within an intercultural world.



Bentwood box, Haida. Queen Charlotte Islands, north coast of British Columbia; collected nineteenth century. Painted cedar; 22 1/4 x 18 1/8 x 17 3/8 in. Canadian Museum of Civilization, Hull, Quebec (no. VII-B-1276).

Made of cedar and decorated with typical northern Northwest Coast paintings, this box uses primary formlines that are dark, curving, and of varying width, while the secondary formlines are red. Ovoid-shaped elements predominate and are the conceptual “centers” of design areas from which U-shapes and other design movements emanate and intermingle. The artist that painted this box was a design master who used inventive junctures and unusual composition to fill out the side of this container with paintings that flow smoothly and elegantly about the surface. This artist followed certain design conventions and yet improvised with innovative ideas of his own. The four sides of this kind of box are made of a single plank of wood – three corners are specially kerfed, or notched, and then the board is steamed and bent to form the box. The bottom is shaped and fitted, then pegged or sewn to the lower edge. The lid of this box is missing, but one would have been made of a thick plank that was hollowed out (to make it lighter and less susceptible to cracking) and fitted to the upper edge. (Brown 2000, 189, pl. 164)

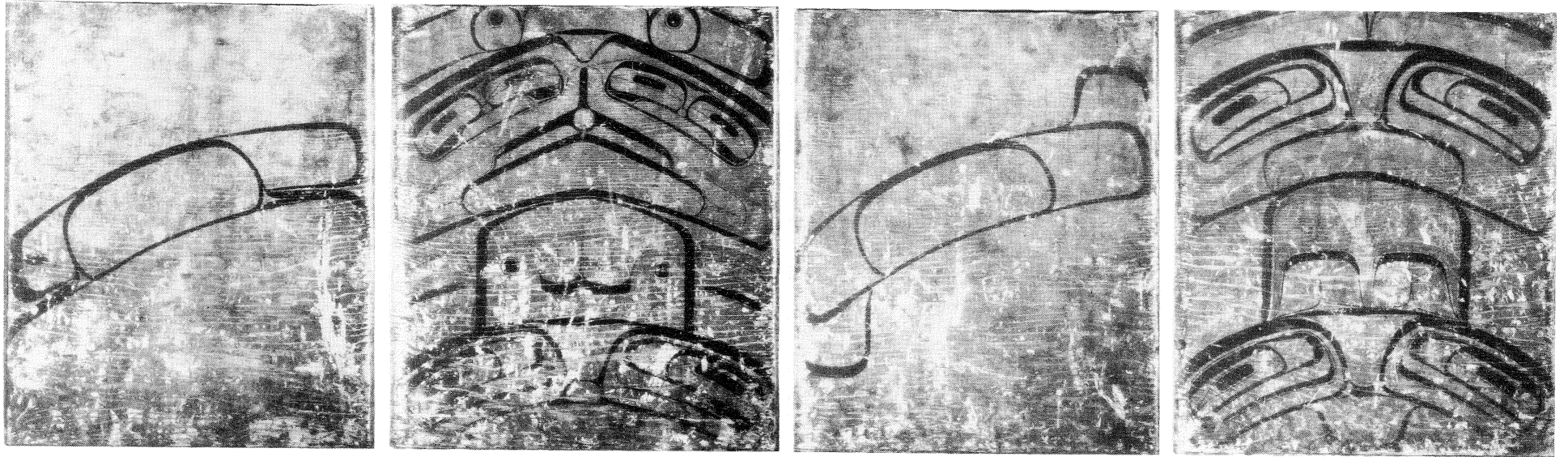
Bentwood box, Haisla. Kitamaat, British Columbia; collected nineteenth century. Cedar, paint, opercula; 58.0 x 42.0 x 40.0 cm. UBC Museum of Anthropology, Vancouver (no. A1597).



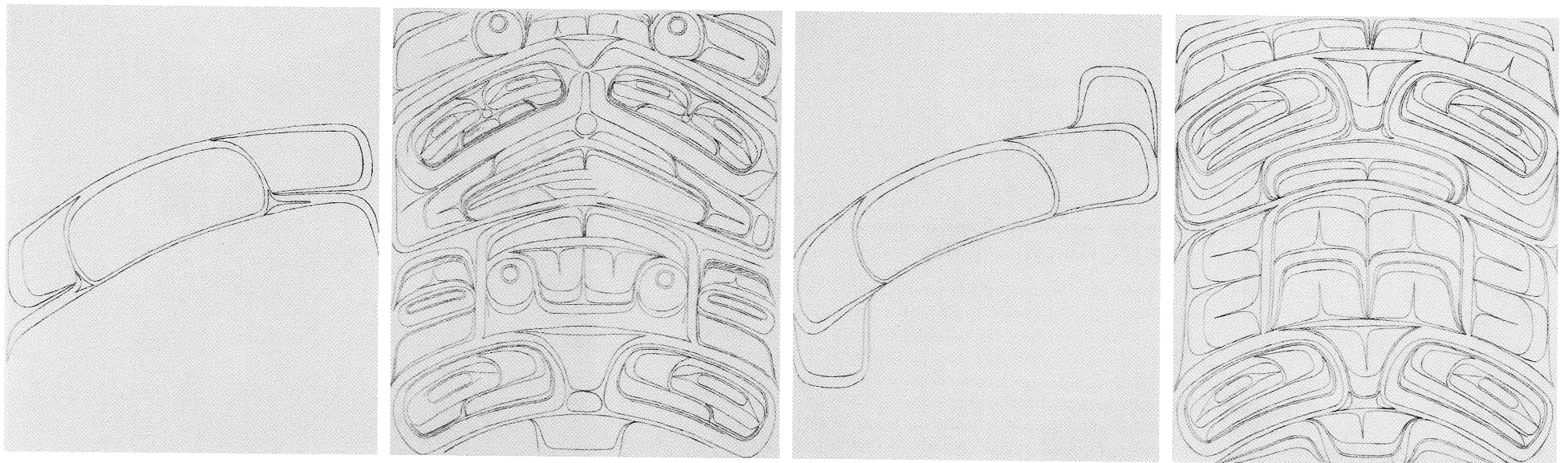
A. The box as seen under normal viewing conditions. Because its surface is coated with accumulated oils and soot, the painted images are largely obscured. (McLennan and Duffek 2000, 6-7, fig. 1.2)



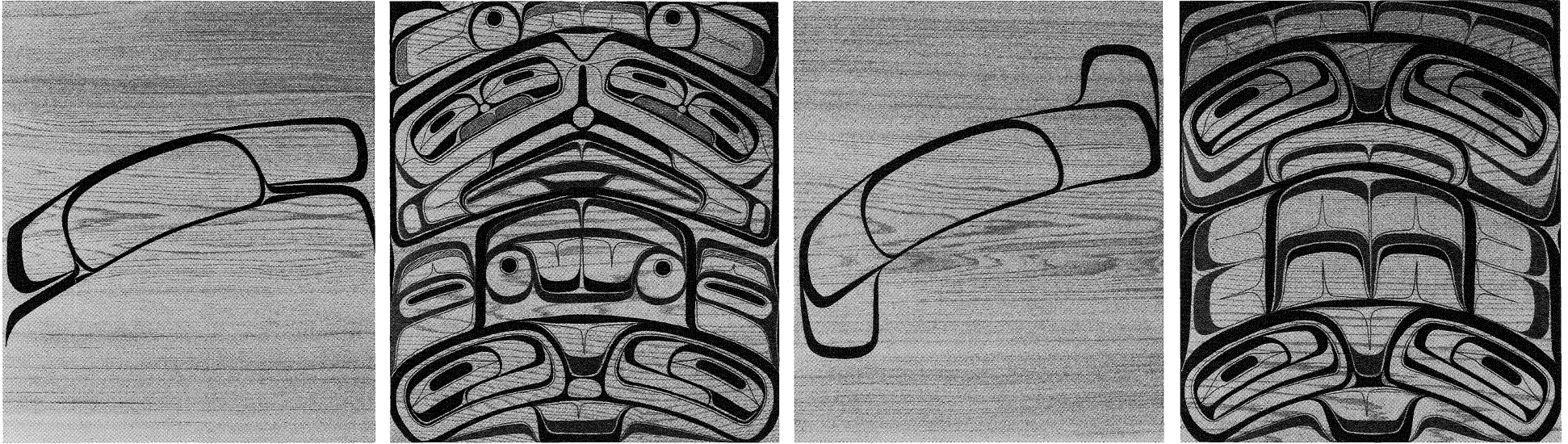
B. The same box is photographed with infrared film. (McLennan and Duffek 2000, 6-7, fig. 1.2)



C. Infrared photographs of each of the four sides of the box bring their painted images to light. (McLennan and Duffek 2000, 6-7, fig. 1.2)



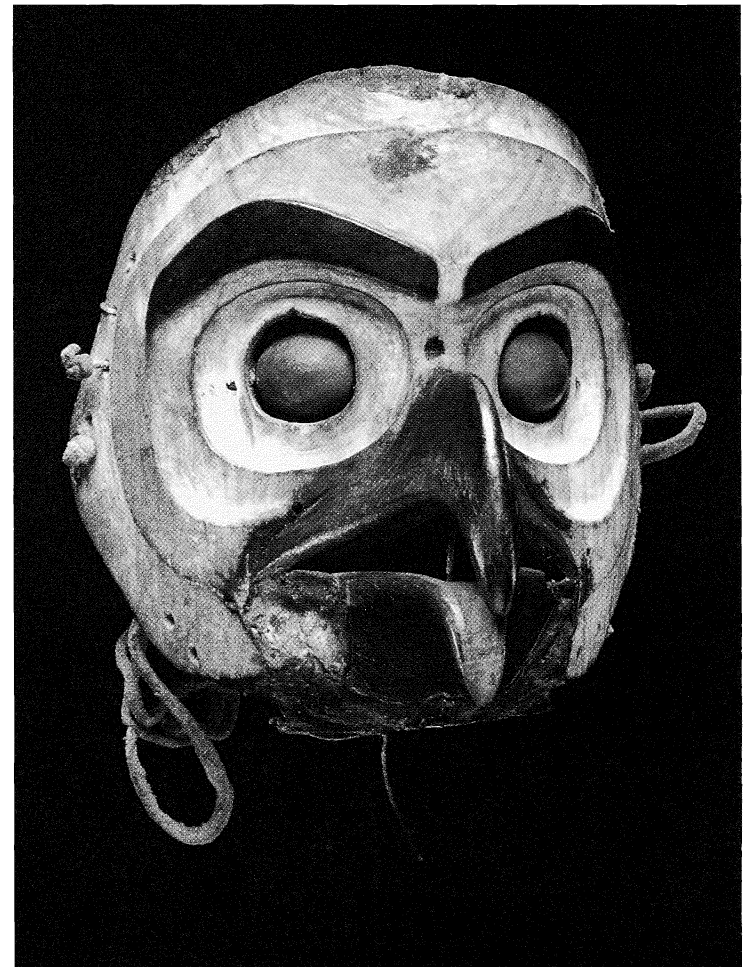
D. Using infrared photographs of each side of the box, Haisla artist Lyle Wilson recreated the painted compositions on new cedar panels in 1992. After enlarging the photographs to the actual size of the box, Wilson traced the forms onto mylar. In areas where the painting was damaged and pigment worn off, he worked with the remaining lines and shapes to extrapolate the missing forms. (McLennan and Duffek 2000, 6-7, fig. 1.2)



E. The four finished paintings allow us to appreciate the historical expression of the Haisla style. Using transfer paper, Wilson transferred the lines for the painting onto a new cedar surface. Each side of the box was recreated as a separate panel. He then painted the composition in black and red, matching the specific tone of red as closely as possible to the original pigment. (McLennan and Duffek 2000, 6-7, fig. 1.2)

Articulated mask, Tsimshian. Gitikshan [sic.], Skeena River Basin, north coast of British Columbia; collected 1909. Painted wood with leather; 8 1/4 x 7 1/4 x 8 1/4 in. American Museum of Natural History, New York (no. 16.1/621).

This mask represents a raptor, possibly an eagle or an owl, with a large curved beak that is movable and large circular eyes that also pivot up and down. When closed, the eyes are white; when open, they are red. The round, hollow eye sockets and black beak suggest the owl image, the changing eyes perhaps its ability to see in daylight and darkness. This signifies both transformation and opposition. The mask was held to the head by means of cords drawn through the holes on the sides of the face. The movable eyes must have made the mask quite startlingly dramatic. George T. Emmons acquired it from among the Gitikshan [sic.], a village on the Skeena River. (Brown 2000, 151, pl. 115)





Chief's seat, attributed to Captain Carpenter (Heiltsuk), ca. 1881. Waglisla (Bella Bella), British Columbia, commissioned by J.A. Jacobsen, 1881. Yellow cedar sides and back, red cedar base, paint; 74.0 x 137.0 x 87.0 cm. Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin (no. IV A 2475/76/77).

When Johan Adrian Jacobsen travelled to British Columbia in 1881 to collect Northwest Coast artifacts for the Royal Berlin Ethnological Museum (now the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin), an elaborately carved chief's seat attracted his attention. "Since it was not possible to buy the piece," he wrote, "I ordered a similar one from the most renowned wood-carver among the Bella Bella." The magnificent seat he commissioned remains one of the best-documented examples of Heiltsuk carving and painting from the 1880s. But the name of its maker was never recorded.

Who was this anonymous artist? ... Important clues have been uncovered in the hundreds of painted images photographed for the Image Recovery Project. To date, over twenty objects from various museums and private collections have been identified as the work of the chief's seat maker, sharing similar elements of style, imagery, and pigment use. As well, a stylistic counterpart to the Berlin seat exists in the collection of the Royal British Columbia Museum. Acquired in 1900 by C.F. Newcombe, this second Heiltsuk chief's seat is undoubtedly the work of the

same artist as the Berlin example, differing primarily in the arrangement of otherwise similar motifs. Perhaps this was the piece that first caught Jacobsen's eye, or it may have been modelled on the same original as the one in Berlin ...

By compiling these pieces of evidence [from Newcombe] with information obtained from historical records, Heiltsuk community members, and a stylistic analysis of related works, we can conclude that Captain Carpenter was the "renowned wood-carver" whose identity has so long been obscured ... The two chiefs' seats that Captain Carpenter created in the last decades of the nineteenth century reveal the confident hand of an artist at the height of his career. (McLennan and Duffek 2000, 220, 223, 228; 221, fig. 7.10)

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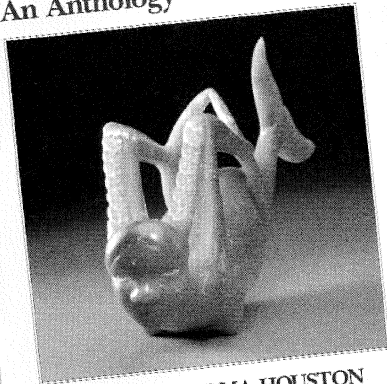
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