Northwest Coast Art

Northwest Coast carving is one of the great sculptural traditions of the world. The Northwest Coast, the region extending from southeast Alaska through British Columbia to the mouth of the Columbia River in Oregon and Washington, has three cultural and linguistic subareas. Artistic practices vary across these subareas: cultures of the northern coast (Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian) are associated with classic formline design, while those of the central coast (Heiltsuk, Kwakwaka'wakw, and Nuxalk) have elements of formline design but adhere less strictly to the conventions that govern the north. The southern coast area includes Coast Salish, Nuu-chah-nulth, and Makah and extends as far as the Chinookan-speaking peoples of the Lower Columbia; each group has its own aesthetic system that is distinct from yet clearly related to those of their northern neighbors.

During the first half of the twentieth century, when Canadian and US government repression of First Nations and Native Americans was at its height, relatively few Native artists were producing traditional Northwest Coast art. But by the 1950s, a growing group of carvers in British Columbia initiated a resurgence of age-old Northwest Coast art forms and designs. Since then, Northwest Coast arts have continued to thrive, expanding from carving into other media such as printmaking. Art-making is central to Indigenous sovereignty: inherent self-governance that is exercised through political and legal systems, language and ceremony, kinship relations and responsibilities, and human relationships with the environment.

Look for themes of transformation and connection between:

Human and animal realms seen in masks such as *Bear*, *Wolf*, *Eagle*, and *Killer Whale,* who can be associated with families, clans, and other societal groups.

Life stages and responsibilities depicted by *Portrait*, *Ancestor*, *Speaker*, and *Warrior* masks.

Lifeways (a culture's customs and practices) and the natural world reflected in the *Salmon* mask and bentwood boxes.

Spiritual and material spheres as embodied in the *Medicine Spirit* mask.

Formline Design

Formline refers to the flowing black and red lines that form the primary and secondary basis of most Northwest Coast designs. Formlines are accompanied by other design elements referred to as ovoids (rounded rectangles often appearing as eyes, eye sockets, and joints), U forms (serving as feathers, fins, ears, or decorative elements), and S and T shapes (referred to as Trigons) that further delineate space. Northwest Coast formline can appear intimidating at first due to its complex and versatile nature. However, the more time one spends analyzing these designs, the more one can recognize and appreciate the diverse range of cultural and individual styles. The following examples are not meant to be comprehensive but to help build a basic understanding of common elements found within this art style:

These shapes and their many variants offer endless possibilities for creative configurations.

Ovoids



U Form Variants



S Shapes and T Shapes (Trigons)



Land

The Northwest Coast is home to the earth's largest temperate rainforest, extending from northern California to southeastern Alaska. It is known for lush expanses of cedar, spruce, and alder, plentiful game and marine life, and tremendous runs of salmon regularly returning from the sea to their upriver birthplaces. Mountain ranges reaching down to the shore include volcanic peaks and are characterized by active geological forces. The materials and the subjects of Northwest Coast art arise from this rich ecosystem. Masks and other carvings represent animals and characteristics of the land itself, often personified, signaling the inseparability of humanity from our environment.

Knowledge is developed over millennia of living on the land and is passed on intergenerationally by teaching about resources to use for food, shelter, clothing, and artwork itself, and how to care for these resources by tending habitats. Stories convey the importance of having respect for the land and its inhabitants, both natural and supernatural. These tales of the forest are reminders to have regard for the connections between the human, animal, and spirit worlds.

Look for:

Animals associated with the land, such as *Bear*, considered a close relation of humankind in part because of its ability to stand on two legs; *Mouse*, a cunning gatherer and communicator of secrets; and *Mountain Goat*, a peak dweller who can move between the earth and sky realms.

Personification of natural phenomena as seen in *Volcano Woman*, who controls volcanic forces. She can act in defense of her beloved wild creatures, especially Frog, whose killing in a Haida legend led to her destruction of an entire village.

Spirits of the forest embodied by *Bak'was* (*Wild Man*) and *Wild Woman of the Woods*, both of whom lure wanderers. Stories about these spirits told to children encourage healthy respect for the potential dangers of the natural and supernatural worlds.

Water

The ocean and rivers not only shape the topography of the Northwest Coast but are deeply embedded in its cosmologies, the understandings of how the world works and evolves and humanity's place in it, past, present, and future. Northwest Coast cosmologies vary by individual culture. They generally emphasize the interconnectedness of human and natural worlds, including that between humanity and the earth's waterways, which are sources of wealth and sustenance as well as danger. Artworks represent creatures associated with the sea, rivers, and streams, and they signal human understandings about the dynamics and capabilities of water.

Waterways historically linked the First Nations of the Northwest Coast, facilitating extensive trade networks traversed in massive canoes carved from whole logs and then widened by a careful steam-softening process into elegant, ocean-worthy vessels. Today, these interconnections continue through the contemporary Tribal Canoe Journey movement, an affirmation of Indigenous sovereignty and intertribal relationships across the Canada–United States national boundary.

Look for:

Animals of the sea and water such as *Loon* (known for its haunting song and ability to traverse different realms) and *Shark* (a fierce wanderer depicted with a high-domed head).

Supernatural beings and spirits who personify the life-giving and life-taking dimensions of the sea and waterways, such as *Pooq-oobs* (the spirit of drowned fishermen) and *Komokwa* (Chief of the Undersea World). *Komokwa* lives in a house full of treasures guarded by a variety of marine life. He is associated with the tides and their riches, with winter storms and summer calm, and with many sea creatures including *Killer Whale* and *Loon*.

Sky

The sky is the home of the sun, moon, and stars, as well as supernatural beings. The sky is also a canvas for the passage of time, whether from night to day or through the seasons of the year. It includes phenomena that are seen, such as eclipses, and phenomena that are unseen, such as the wind.

Birds and other flying creatures (including the supernatural variety) are uniquely able to transcend earth and to move between land, water, and sky. Each exemplifies a wide range of attributes and capabilities, characteristics that are often shared with humans.

Look for:

Creatures of the sky such as *Eagle*, known for keen perception, and *Mosquito*, who embodies irritation and annoyance.

Personification of atmospheric and celestial phenomena such as *Four Winds* and *Eclipse*. *Four Winds* actually represents a particular location in Nuu-chal-nulth territory where the winds blow in all directions. *Eclipse* was created in response to the 2017 solar eclipse seen from much of the Pacific Northwest Coast and reaching totality in Salem.

Supernatural beings and spirits such as *Thunderbird* (associated with thunder and lightning, and with power, courage, and respect) and *Hawkman* (a helping spirit, whose qualities include insight and memory).