

CHAPTER 3

The World is as Sharp as a Knife: Meaning in Northern Northwest Coast Art

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The understanding of the iconographic meaning of northern Northwest Coast art has lagged far behind the descriptive analysis of its form. I suggest that we are still very far indeed from a full understanding of its deeper levels of meaning. "Meaning" may be defined simply as the answers to two questions: "what things is it about?" and "what is it saying about them?" In other words, what are the subjects and what are the predicates? As for the "deeper" meanings, the question is: "what else, by analogy, is it also about?" What other topics and relationships does it also symbolize? Meaning is not just interpretation of the subject, identification of the creature that is "represented." We are frequently able to take that first step. However, in Panofsky's (1939) terms, to do only that is to fail to penetrate beyond the pre-iconographic to the iconographic and iconological levels of meaning. It also fails to perceive the latent structural symbolism. "What does it mean?" is a much broader question than "what does it represent?" Existing studies of the art contribute to the understanding of other aspects of its significance. A knowledge of its cultural context is necessary to understand the process of its production and its significance in action (Gunther 1966). Analyses of its form (Haeberlin 1918, Wingert 1951, Holm and Reid 1975) contribute immeasurably to its aesthetic appreciation. Holm's (1965) descriptive analysis of the elements and rules of composition of the two dimensional art has been a giant step toward the understanding of its deeper meanings, but to describe its form is not yet fully to explain its meaning.

Existing interpretations of the meanings of the iconography provide partial answers. The first of the usual explanations is that the images represent totemic crests, which metaphorically differentiate social groups. A second

is that they represent spirit creatures or characters and episodes from the mythology. Art, that is to say, is a servant of the social and religious systems, and has its existence in order to make these tangible and visible. A third explanation, that art may be pure decoration or formal design for its own sake, speaks more in the language of form than of meaning. It is not my claim that any of these explanations are wrong. I only want to show that they fail to provide complete answers to questions of meaning raised by the art itself.

Examples will be shown of images whose meanings are not sufficiently explained by the currently available interpretations. I want to suggest an additional way of looking at this art. It is my hypothesis that further agendas were also at work in it, such that it was coming to express more powerful symbols and therefore deeper and more general meanings. In addition, it was becoming an autonomous, non-verbal medium for thinking in images. Without relinquishing its other functions it was also invoking deeper symbols, and was becoming a primary language of thought in the medium of images. It was a system of imaging in which the deeper meanings were coming to receive as much conscious attention as the shallower ones.

Images. A number of concepts will be introduced. "Image" is the term I use for the principal segment of iconography. An image is typically a more complex unit than a single-figure depiction, showing an act or relationship as well as a subject. Having both a subject and a predicate it is a system which has structure. It is therefore a statement of meaning. Images have two aspects: content and structure. The iconographic content consists of "symbols." The inner structures may be called "armatures." Images are therefore

structures consisting of symbols set upon armatures. Each image is unique, but regular rules presumably exist in the use of symbols and the kinds of armatures.

Symbols. Symbols in art are those pictorial figures which reveal what it is about, identify its subject. The subjects may be things or acts. They may be depicted literally or metaphorically. In this art, they may literally depict the crests and mythic creatures of the social and religious systems. But also, or instead, they may metaphorically have reference to more general and abstract powers, or to that primary source of deep symbolism, the human body-self. For the art is also about being human; ultimately, about those aspects of being human which are most sacred and therefore most repressed and tabooed. Sexual parts and sexual acts are almost never depicted literally, but frequently receive metaphorical representation. Human faces, eyes and whole figures are not subject to visual taboos, and may be used to express figuratively the tabooed parts and acts. "Beaks" and "mouths" carry great symbolic weight in this art.

Armatures. Armatures are the structural relationships between symbols. They are the ways of making visual equations. They are the predicates of statements in which symbols are the subjects. They are the inner structure of images. Examples will be shown of armatures which use bilateral symmetry, reciprocal or part-whole relationships, a trinity arrangement, a facial beak-mouth relationship.

Paradigms. Paradigms are the forms in which specific problems get worked out in the art. Each paradigm is related to an artifact type (e.g., spoon paradigms, house-post paradigms) and its meaning has a relationship to a meaning of the artifact. The image, that is to say, is "about" the artifact. Paradigms are repeated solutions to the same problems. The problems are hidden agendas, known to the artists and having to do with the deeper meanings of the art.

Boas (1955:12) once said that it is essential to bear in mind the two-fold source of artistic effect, the one based on form alone, and the other on ideas associated with form otherwise the theory of art will be one-sided. I think that what Boas meant by "idea associated with form" is what I mean by "meaning." Today thanks to Holm we are in a position where we can describe with great detail and great sensitivity the form of Northwest Coast art. We can describe the ovoids, and the primary, secondary and tertiary formline structure in a vocabulary he designed for us. However to describe the form is not to explain the meaning. It seems to me that the description of Northwest Coast art has suffered from the dangers Boas forecasted and has become a little bit one-sided, because we can say a lot about form but not very much about meaning. The explanation of the meaning of the art has lagged very much behind the description of



Fig. 3:1. Tsimshian crest carving representing a frog.



Fig. 3:2. Horn spoon showing sexual symbolism. At one end is a phallus, and at the other a large-mouthed creature, possibly a seal.

the form. Now since I really don't know what meaning is, I think I will let you figure it out from my paper as we go along. I'll leave it with Boas' "idea associated with form."

We do have existing interpretations of meaning of Northwest Coast art, and these take us a long way along the road to understanding it. For example, the Tsimshian crest in Figure 3:1, we can all, having studied Boas, recognize the figure as a frog. This frog figure is a crest referring to a particular social group, and really all that needs to be said about it is that this image of Northwest Coast art represents a crest. In addition quite frequently the images of Northwest Coast art plainly represent episodes from myths as on this spoon (not illustrated)

where we seem to have three episodes from the raven mythology of the northern coast, probably the Haida. The figure in the centre, for example, seems to be Raven who has become voraciously hungry, and wanting to eat the bait off the halibut fisherman's hook turns himself into a halibut, gets himself caught, and then when he is cooked he comes out of the halibut again. So some of the images of Northwest Coast art plainly depict episodes from myths, and also some of the images of Northwest Coast art depict spirit figures. They show us what the spirits look like (otherwise how would we know?), and these are all correct interpretations as far as I am concerned; the trouble is that they don't seem to be sufficient for my purposes.

Now they are not sufficient for two reasons. One is that they don't seem to allow us to tie this great art style in with any of the general theories of art in the world. There is no tie, for example, with the theories of George Devereau, or with the theories of Panofsky on meaning in art. The direction along the road that we have taken doesn't seem to get us that far. Furthermore the explanations that we currently have don't seem to do justice to what we feel are the masterpieces of Northwest Coast art.

Now in Figure 3:3 is another crest helmet, which I take to be Tsimshian, and we can say that the animal figure is a bear. But what are those hands doing there? This figure is a bear with five human hands and the hands are very prominent; they are not explained in a story, as far as we know, or on the crest. I have to tell you one thing about the hands; the one at the back has no thumb. That hat has five hands, one of which has no thumb. It seems to me there is an additional agenda going on there which we don't understand, and it seems to me that when we are describing the ethnological masterpieces of Northwest Coast art the things we know intuitively are very important. We have great difficulty in talking about their meaning, and I always refer back to the kind of spectacle which has to do with the Chilkat blanket (Fig. 3:4). Under each illustration of a Chilkat blanket design in Emmons' (1907) monograph there is an interpretation by Emmons which says that it depicts a particular thing, perhaps a whale diving. Then there is another interpretation by Boas who steps in as editor and says "No, it represents a bear sitting up on his haunches." Sometimes there is even a third interpretation by Swanton, giving a third thing that it might depict. Now it doesn't seem to have occurred to anybody at that time that there may have been different agendas at work, that maybe these designs were dancing to a different tune as well as just trying to represent creatures.

This box illustrated in Figure 3:5 is the "final exam" on northern Northwest Coast art. This is a very famous box, and when we get to the point of being able to say, "What is going on in that design," we will really understand the

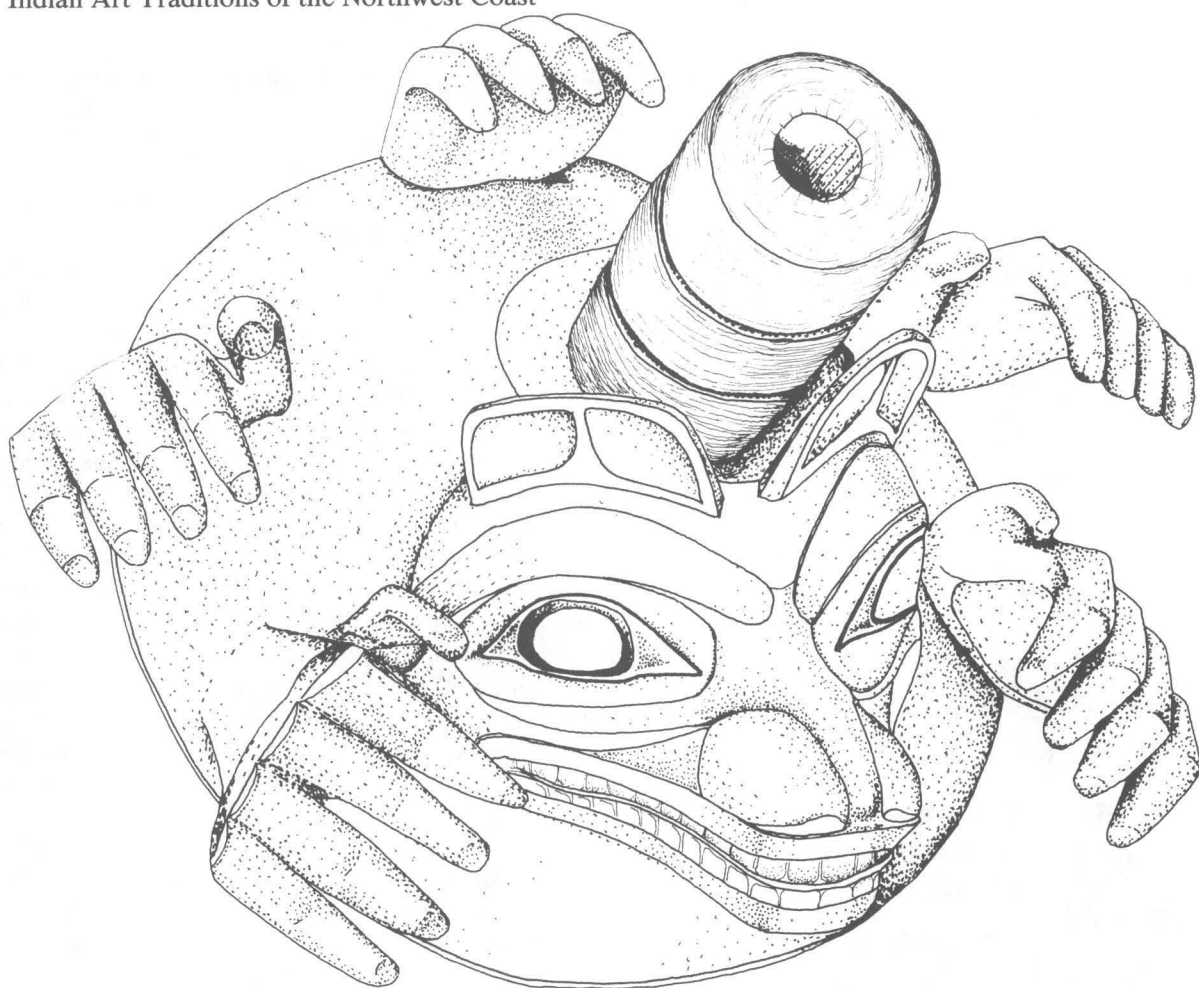


Fig. 3:3. Tsimshian crest helmet with bear face and five hands. Why does the hand at the back have no thumb?



Fig. 3:4. Chilkat blanket. Different authors give different interpretations of these designs. How many agendas were at work?



Fig. 3:5. The "final exam" on northern Northwest Coast art. Design from a wooden box identified by Charlie Edenshaw as four episodes of Raven, the culture hero. We do not understand this design.

meaning in Northwest Coast art. The box is in the American Museum of Natural History, and was collected by Emmons way back in the early 80's at Chilkat. Boas studied it, and actually brought pictures of it to show to Charlie Edenshaw, who said it represents four episodes of raven, the culture hero. Boas didn't believe him and didn't report it for thirty years afterwards. We have all been intrigued with this box; it's a favorite of Bill Reid, who has copied it in many forms, but we don't know what to say about the design. It doesn't seem to represent a crest, it doesn't seem to represent a myth, and it doesn't seem to represent a spirit. We bring ourselves to believe that it is just empty design, whatever that might be. Some other agenda is at work which we don't yet understand. One of the things we don't fully understand yet, either, in terms of meaning is the raven rattle.

The raven rattle (Fig. 3:6) is one of the most important single bundles of iconography on the northern Northwest Coast. I know that we have all been intrigued with it for a very long time. Three, four or five years ago I had one of my students, Jennifer Gould, do an M.A. thesis on the raven rattle, trying to get at its meaning. She brought to bear Panofsky's concepts of iconographic and iconological interpretation with some success. I think Bill Holm has had a student do an M.A. thesis which would presumably be on the raven rattle form. But the raven rattle is also one of the "final exams" of northern Northwest Coast art. When we get to understand it fully, we will understand meaning in Northwest Coast art.

Now, that is the problem, it seems that the greater the masterpiece in Northwest Coast art the less we can say about its meaning. What I hope to do is kind of jolt you or pique you a little bit with some new ideas (I think they are new), about ways in which we can look at this art, and suggest other agendas that may be going on in it.

Specifically what I plan to do is to try to show that there is a level of symbolism at work deeper than just crest spirit, and also to try to begin to develop a terminology that can get to the sculptural analysis of the images of the art. This is something we are just starting on.

The first thing I want to do (I have to introduce some new terms, and I am not happy with the terms; afterwards I would be happy if you people would come up with better terms) is define the essential iconographic unit. It isn't a single figure depiction. This tobacco mortar (Fig. 3:7), probably Haida, is one of my examples of the unit which I am going to call the image. The image is a more complex unit than just a single figure depiction. This image depicts a beaver; it's a beaver face; it does have beaver teeth, although they are not visible in this shot; it has a beaver tail, and it has beaver hind legs. But it also has hands, and they are human hands, and the hands are on backwards, so to speak. It is a complex image which has symbolic content and the content is arranged in a set of relationships which can be called a structure. An image is a system with content and structure which is presumably subject to a structural analysis.

Here is another image (Fig. 3:8) on the base of a horn spoon. I don't know what it represents, but it seems to be a large bird-like creature associated with a human face; it has four-fingered hands, which are rather strange and up at the top what may be wings. I don't know what it is saying. I am calling this type of unit an image and saying that it has content, it has arrangement, it has structure and should therefore be subject to a structural analysis. I think it is probably a statement which has a subject and a predicate.

Now the second thing that I want to do is to try to get at a deeper level of symbolism which is operating in the art. It isn't a case where only one thing is going on at one



Fig. 3:6. A raven rattle: another “final exam” in northern Northwest Coast art whose meaning we do not fully comprehend.



Fig. 3:7. Tobacco mortar, probably Haida, with a beaver face and backward human hands.

time. It is operating at different levels at the same time, and one of the deeper levels that I want to get at is the sexual symbolism at work. Now the image in *Figure 3:9* is one of the very important ones in my argument; it is the Sechelt image which was one of the key images in *Images Stone B.C.* (Duff 1975). It is quite large, about twenty inches high or so, and is not from the northern Northwest Coast. It is from the southern Northwest Coast from Sechelt, north of Vancouver. One of my assumptions is that some of the roots of Northwest Coast art are in the south. I find intriguing hints in Bill Holm's presentation of this too. This image has been interpreted as a blatantly sexual symbolism at work. Now the image in *Figure 3:9* is powerful male figure with, in the front, a huge phallus. It is a phallic male, but in addition it has a vulva form place down here which is a female symbol. Now I have given a great deal of thought to this punning, to this double meaning that is going on and I am convinced, although not everybody else is, that it is two things at once. It is male, phallic, and it is also a female, mother and child. It is both. Now one of the reasons I want it to be that, is that it solves one of the fundamental problems of sculpture around the world, and that is to depict the human indivi-

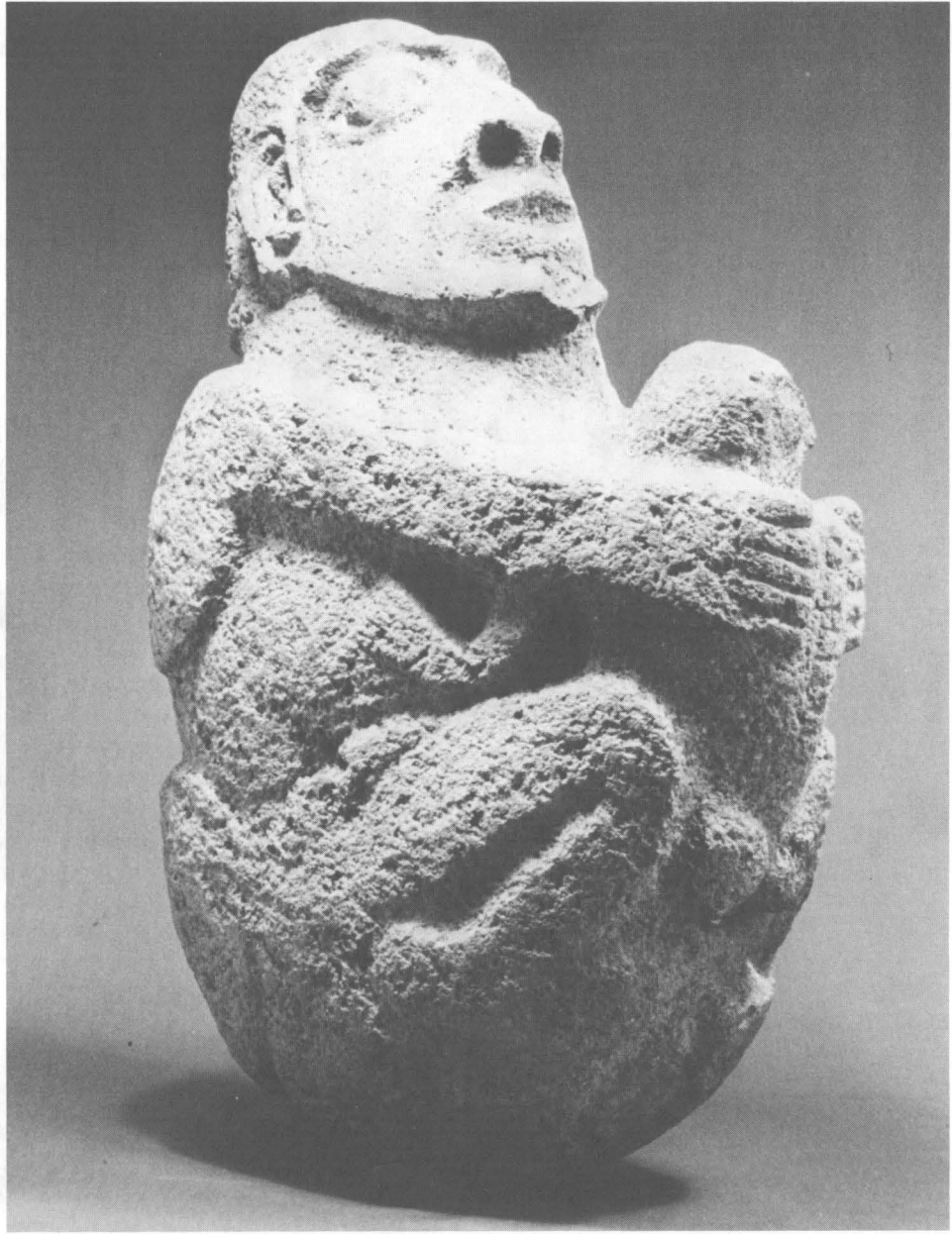


Fig. 3:8. Base of a spoon of mountain goat horn. Note the four fingers.
 Fig. 3:9. The Sechelt image. This figure is male, phallic, and also female, mother and child.
 What does it mean?

duum, not the individual, but the individuum, the eternal human. The forms in which we have it in our background are usually mother and child, between mother and male child but there is some attempt to depict sculpturally either a pair or a triplet which would be, in effect, mother and father and child in the same figure and this is the solution to the problem of the individuum. It is male, mother and child at the same time. Now we don't find this in later Northwest Coast art, and one of the assumptions that I am making is that sexual symbolism was shown more literally in earlier days than it was in recent North-

west Coast art. In fact, in recent Northwest Coast art is so conspicuous by its absence that we should be suspicious. Sexual characteristics are practically absent completely from recent northern Northwest Coast art.

In Figure 3:10 a human figure on the base of a totem pole at Hazelton. It is generic human, it isn't a portrait of any kind and it has conspicuous absence of any sexual characteristics. Now I think that this generic human in northern Northwest Coast art is another solution to the problem of the individual where instead of having a figure that has sexual characteristics of all, it has sexual charac-



Fig. 3:10. Figure at base of totem pole at Hazelton. Note the conspicuous absence of sexual characteristics.

teristics of none. It is not a portrait, but it is a generic figure; it is in effect half male, half female, half child, half adult. You can see it in many forms on totem poles, and on frontlets, where it is a perfect blend, part male, part female, part child, part adult. The human individuum in the recent northern Northwest Coast solution to that problem begs the question of sex, and leaves it out completely. Now sexual symbolism is so important in the arts of the world and elsewhere that I feel that its virtual absence on the surface of Northwest Coast art permits us to suspect that we might find it in metaphorical forms below the surface.

We can go back to an earlier stratum. Fortunately, there are a few examples of things that are fifteen or twenty centuries old from the northern Northwest Coast, and I refer specifically to the stone clubs from the Hagwilget cache found up the Skeena River near Hazelton in 1898. This is one of the most remarkable archaeological finds in North America; a group of thirty-five stone batons or clubs were found cached together, and many of them are sculptured. We brought together several of them for the *Images Stone B.C.* show. On a lot of these clubs there are explicit sexual characteristics. Figure 3:11, for example, is pretty phallic on the handle end. The most remarkable of these clubs in this way is this absolutely amazing piece of stone sculpture shown in Figure 3:12. It is about fifteen inches long and is one of the so-called clubs. I don't know what else to call them, although they were obviously not functional clubs as war clubs. The power was more in the symbol or the image than in the actual utility.

The club in Figure 3:13 is a very remarkable piece of

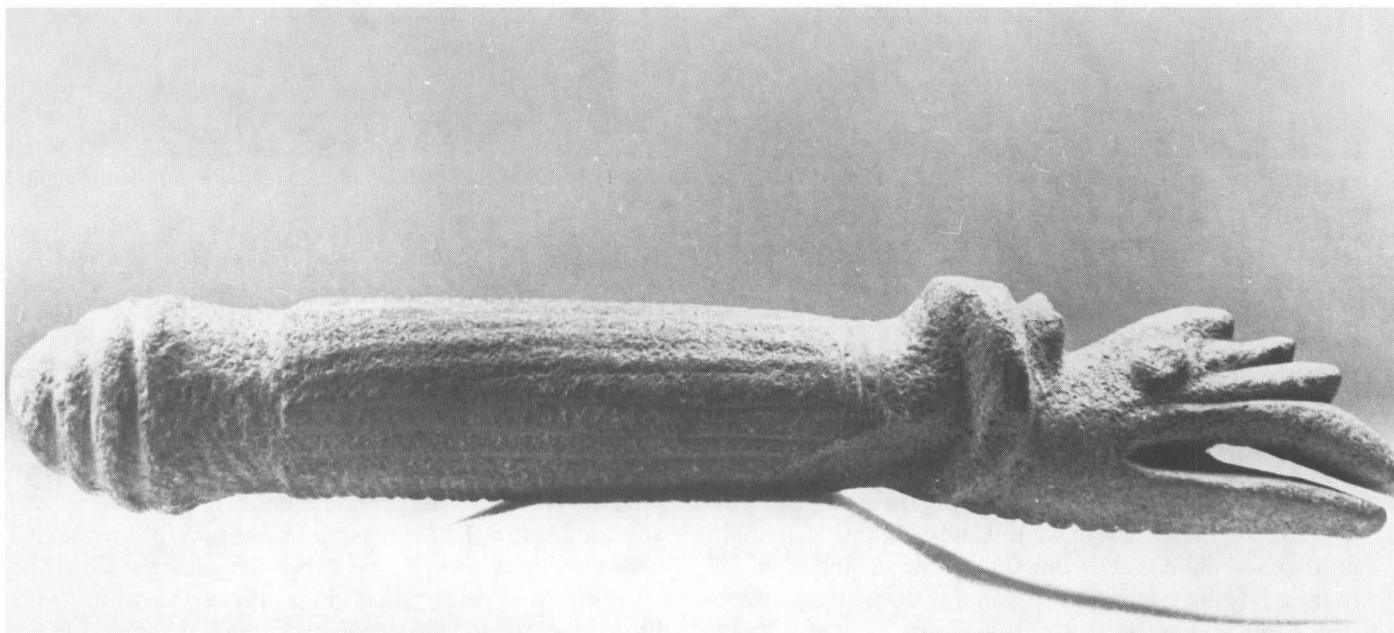


Fig. 3:11. Phallic club from the Hagwilget cache.

sculpture and still has paint on it. If the handle end is not phallic then my whole argument fails. I read one end as phallic, but now I want to hark back to the idea of the image which is a system. In a sense it is an equation and the other end of the same club is not phallic, but I take it to be the opposite. Now, I invite you when you have time, to contemplate the problem of an artist in depicting the opposite of phallic symbolism. I think it is a problem that could be said to have something to do with the donut and the hole, but I'm not quite sure. However, with the vulvic symbolism it seems it is often more necessary to resort to metaphor, and I take the opposite end of Figure 3:13 to be a mouth which doesn't have to be the mouth of any particular thing; it is just a mouth; it is a toothed mouth; it is a very elaborately toothed mouth. I take it to be a vulvic symbol. So I take this club to be a kind of an equation, an image, a very carefully worked out image, a very powerful image, which is phallic on the one end and vulvic on the other, a phallic-vulvic image. Some of the terminology is really me.

I am going to take you on a bit of an adventure here. Take this phallic-vulvic image with the phallic end up and subject it to a metaphorical transformation keeping the same underlying image, changing the scale and changing the metaphor, and you get something like this. The frontal pole, in Figure 3:14 is one of the largest on the Northwest Coast, and was in front of Chief Wheya's house at Masset. It's an image, the whole thing, and on the top is a big expandable hat which is another metaphorical way of saying it, I guess, and on the bottom is a huge mouthed creature, and basically the underlying image I take to be a phallic-vulvic woman. Now we have



Fig. 3:12. Phallic end of fifteen inch long stone club from the Hagwilget cache.

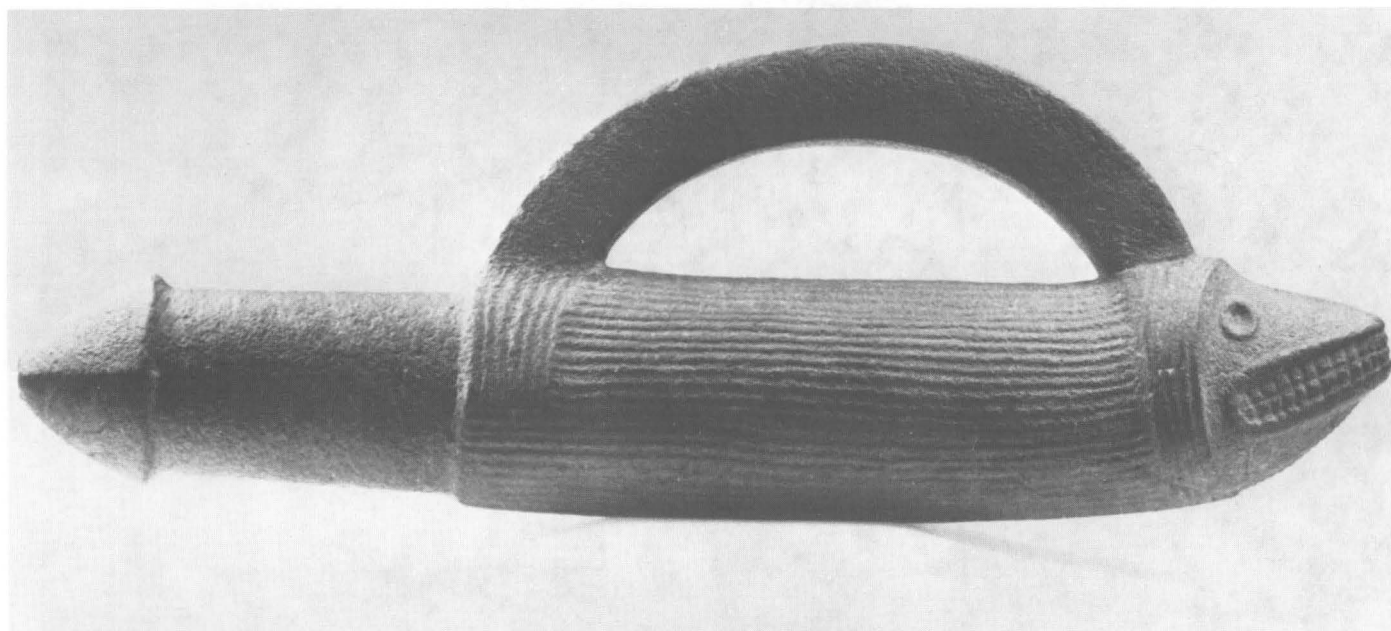


Fig. 3:13. Stone club from Hagwilget cache showing equation of phallic and vulvic ends.

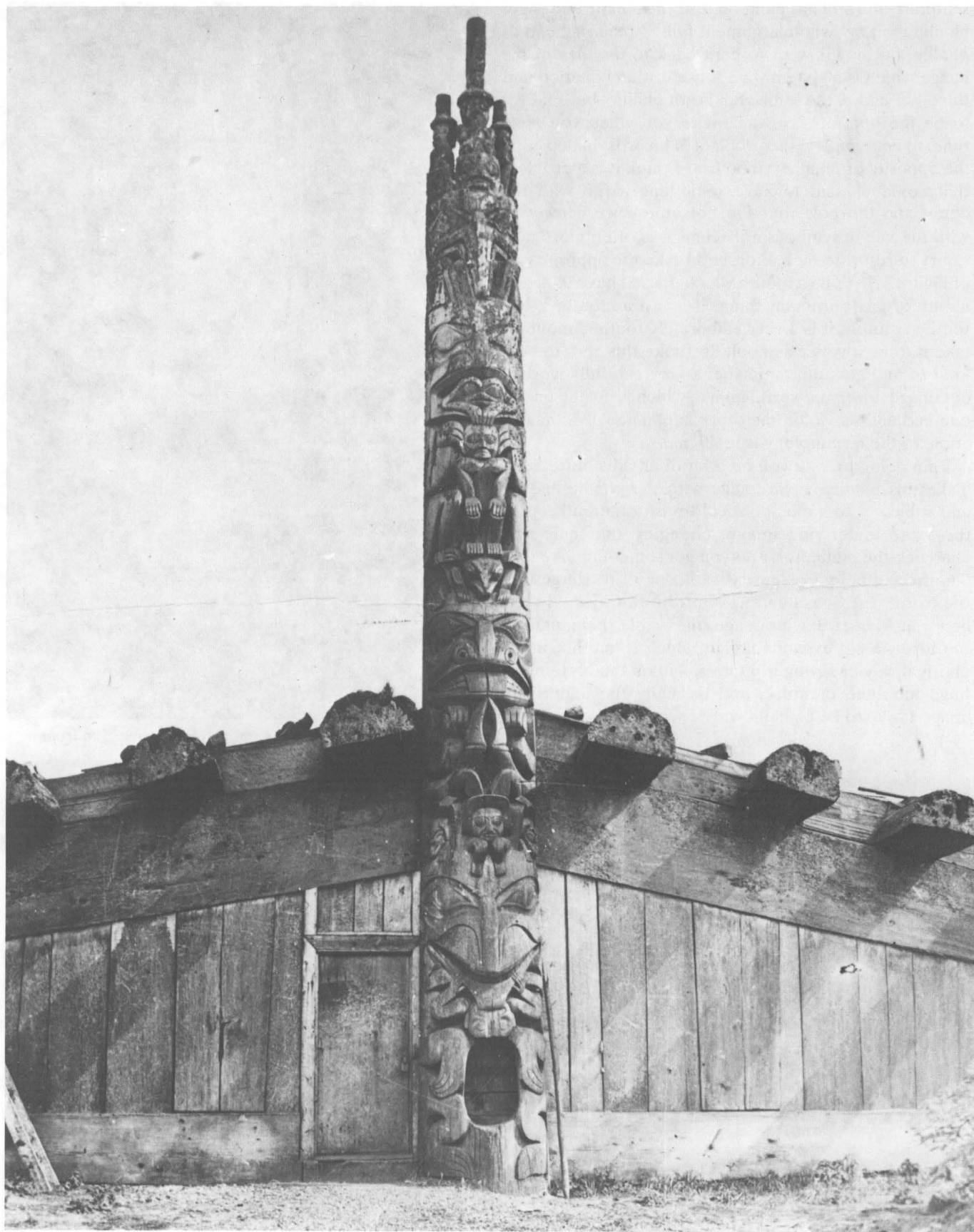


Fig. 3:14. Frontal pole from house at Masset exemplifying phallic-vulvic symbolism.

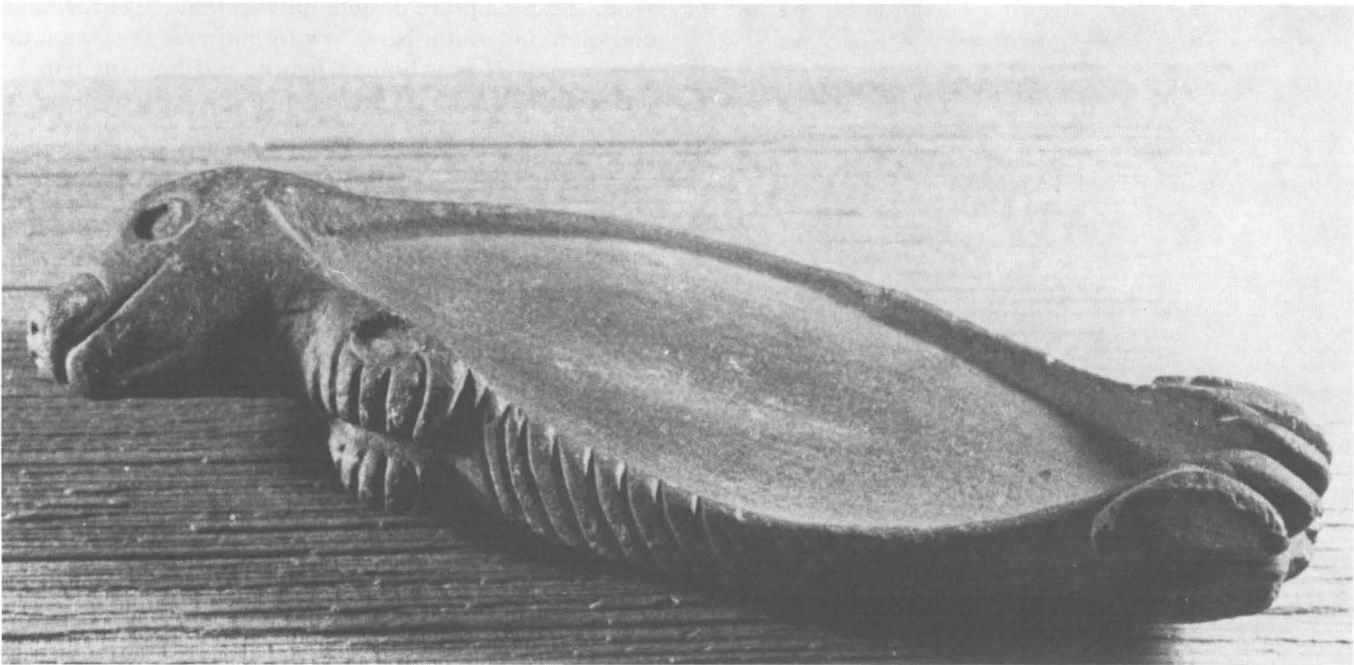


Fig. 3:15. Small seal figure bowl exhibiting vulvic symbolism. Found near Yale, B.C.



Fig. 3:16. Seated human figure bowl found near Lillooet, B.C.

always suspected that there might have been something phallic in totem pole imagery. A little bit of confirmation in the idea of the phallic-vulvic image in these older Haida totem poles which have an oval door opening at the base, is given by Jimmy Deans, a Scotsman who got to the Queen Charlotte Islands before the missionaries and wasn't as inhibited as they. He did record that the oval entrance at the base of the totem pole was considered to be the female generative organ, so it is a vulvic image. I invite you to look at the bear, just above it, with the upside down human figure. We are going to come back to that.

Now, if there is phallic symbolism and images based on it, it would be male chauvinism to suggest that there isn't the opposite. Looking for vulvic symbolism, I take as my type specimen, this little ancient, archaic stone vessel (Fig. 3:15) from the Fraser Canyon near Yale. This is another case where the more explicit imagery is older and southern. This is a little seal figure and the vessel has that distinctive, what I call vulvic form. If this isn't a vulvic image, then my argument about vulvic imagery fails. Now, seal and vulva as a metaphor persists on the Northwest Coast, farther north, in the seal grease dishes. Many of them have as their vessel that vulvic form shape. It is another case of the persistence of an image in a different medium.

The seated human figure bowl in Figure 3:16 comes from the Fraser River near Lillooet. We don't really know its age, possibly something like fifth century. I was very interested to note Bill Holm's comment on the similarities between the style of such bowls and northern Northwest Coast style, because I see that too. I see these as North-



Fig. 3:17. Seated human figure bowl from near Lytton, B.C.

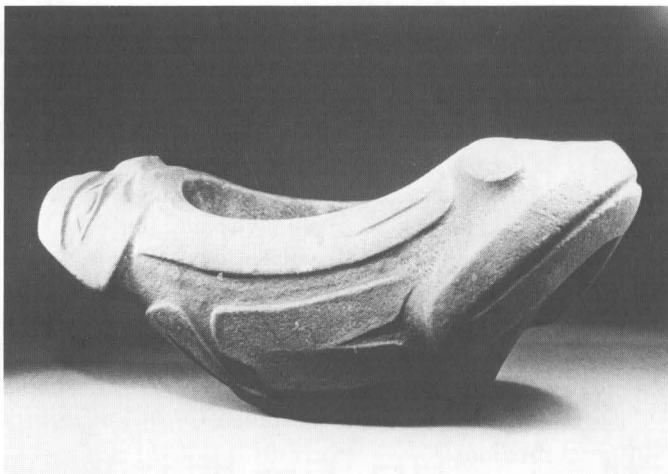


Fig. 3:18. Stone tobacco mortar from the historic period on the northern Queen Charlotte Islands.

west Coast sculpture despite the fact that they are inland and quite far south. Now how to interpret this, what do they mean? It is a human figure, and humans can be either male or female; there is nothing at all on these to suggest that they are male. They have a vessel in the belly or in the lap or between the legs or however you want to put it, and they seem to have been used for female puberty rituals. So one could suggest that it is a female figure that is represented, and that the vessel is the female vessel, and that the vessel and the figure are of the same size. In other words the part is the same size as the whole, I am going to be saying a few enigmatic things like that, and doing it purposely, because I think the language of imagery of the Northwest Coast does use some of the figures of speech of that kind, the part and the whole being the same thing. This is a rhetorical figure called synecdoche where the part represents the whole. The part and the whole are the same female figure with sexual meanings, perhaps.

Now I want to show you an example of what might be the persistence of an image through time and in a different medium. Figure 3:17 is one of the seated human figure bowls from Lytton. This bowl has a very Northwest Coast face, and down on the front of the vessel here with the head down is a creature that might be called a frog or a toad. It is a human figure bowl with a frog on the front of the vessel. Now some 1500 years later in time and 500 miles farther north in space we find Figure 3:18 on the northern Queen Charlotte Islands, which I call the Edenshaw tobacco mortar. It too is essentially, when you look at it this way, a seated human figure bowl with a creature on the front which might be considered to be the frog. This is a human; it has arms; put it down on its face, and it has a backbone and legs here, and these can be read as its arms. It is in fact a seated human figure bowl with a frog on the front. I think it is even more complex than that. I think it is a seated human figure bowl, a seal dish and a bowl with a frog on the front all at the same time.

Now what about the logic? The frog or whatever that creature is on the front has become much larger; the part has become greater than the whole. That frog or whatever that mouth creature is, is larger enough so that its mouth could swallow the entire mortar of which it is a part; the part *has* become greater than the whole.

Now in Figure 3:19 is a little wooden dish, which turns out to be a seated human figure bowl as well with a human figure with arms and hands around the rim of the vessel, a backbone and legs. It has a seated human figure bowl with the vessel as the bowl but the vessel is bigger than the whole now, and the part is greater than the whole. That progression up the coast seems to hold, and here an equation is made so that the seated human figure bowl is also a raven, so that the female part of it is in the back of the raven. The raven symbol, I read as being phallic on the front with the beak, and vulvic in the back.



Fig. 3:19. Wooden bowl from the northern Northwest Coast showing similarities with the raven rattle.

Putting a couple of these together you can see the close similarities between that kind of bowl and the raven rattle. It seems that when you are working on the northern Northwest Coast, all roads lead to the raven rattle. The seated human figure bowl type here punned as a raven is so similar to the raven rattle that they could almost be from the hands of the same artist. If there is an equation of imagery being made here, it means that this vessel, being a vulvic symbol, is somehow related to this thing on the back of the raven rattle and I will come back to that a little bit later.

So much for phallic and vulvic symbolism. What about the symbolism of the sexual act itself? Unlike the arts of other parts of the world, the act of sexual intercourse is never depicted on the Northwest Coast, and here again is what I think the archaeologists would call a significant absence. When you never see it, it is probably evidence that it is tabooed and repressed, but we might still look for it in disguise or in metaphorical forms. The only place where sexual activity occurs explicitly in Northwest Coast art, is on Haida argillite panels showing the bear mother myth and the sexual activity that takes place between the bear husband and his *human* wife. Marius Barbeau discovered this sexual activity on the bear mother panels and described it with some surprise (Barbeau 1957). Haida myths define a great variety of sexual activity, but Barbeau characteristically finds that this sort of thing couldn't have been at home on the Northwest Coast, and he would bring it from the Orient or across the Pacific. It is another one of Barbeau's importations. There is sexual activity on these panels between the bear husband and the *human* wife, that seemed to interest the carver of these panels. The carver of many of them may

have been Charlie Edenshaw. He wanted to depict that particular episode of the myth. The one illustrated shows the interacting metaphorically as bears or as a bear and a human, and on the left side there is an interaction between the bear and the human which has a detail which is of interest to me, and that is the joining of tongues of the human creature and the bear (Fig. 3:20). In the 1830's or so the Haida panel pipes developed one form where there is a great deal of activity with tongues and joining of tongues. We don't know what to say about the meaning of the panel pipes either, but here, as of the 1830's a great deal of play was joined tongues, maybe metaphoric or something. On some of the panel pipes of this kind, some of the activities (if you look at them with the eye of a dirty old man), can be seen as pretty sexual. If you will just contemplate the poses of this group of three in Figure 3:21, and forget that they are metaphorical beasts in term with the humans, you've got something that is pretty explicitly sexual going on, or at least that is the way I see it. There is sexual fun going on with the joined tongues on these 1830 panel pipes. Now where does it come from? It does hark back, I think, to an earlier source, and I think it is this source: the joined tongues that form such an important feature of the thing on the back of the raven rattle.

Now, this human reclining figure on the back of the raven rattle (Fig. 3:6) is one of the most daring pieces of Northwest Coast art. There is only one purpose, I think, for which a human being will assume that particular posture. Here we have a situation where a human being (sometimes this is called a man, but that is male chauvinism; it could just as well be called a woman) is in that particular posture, which is a sexual posture, but the thing

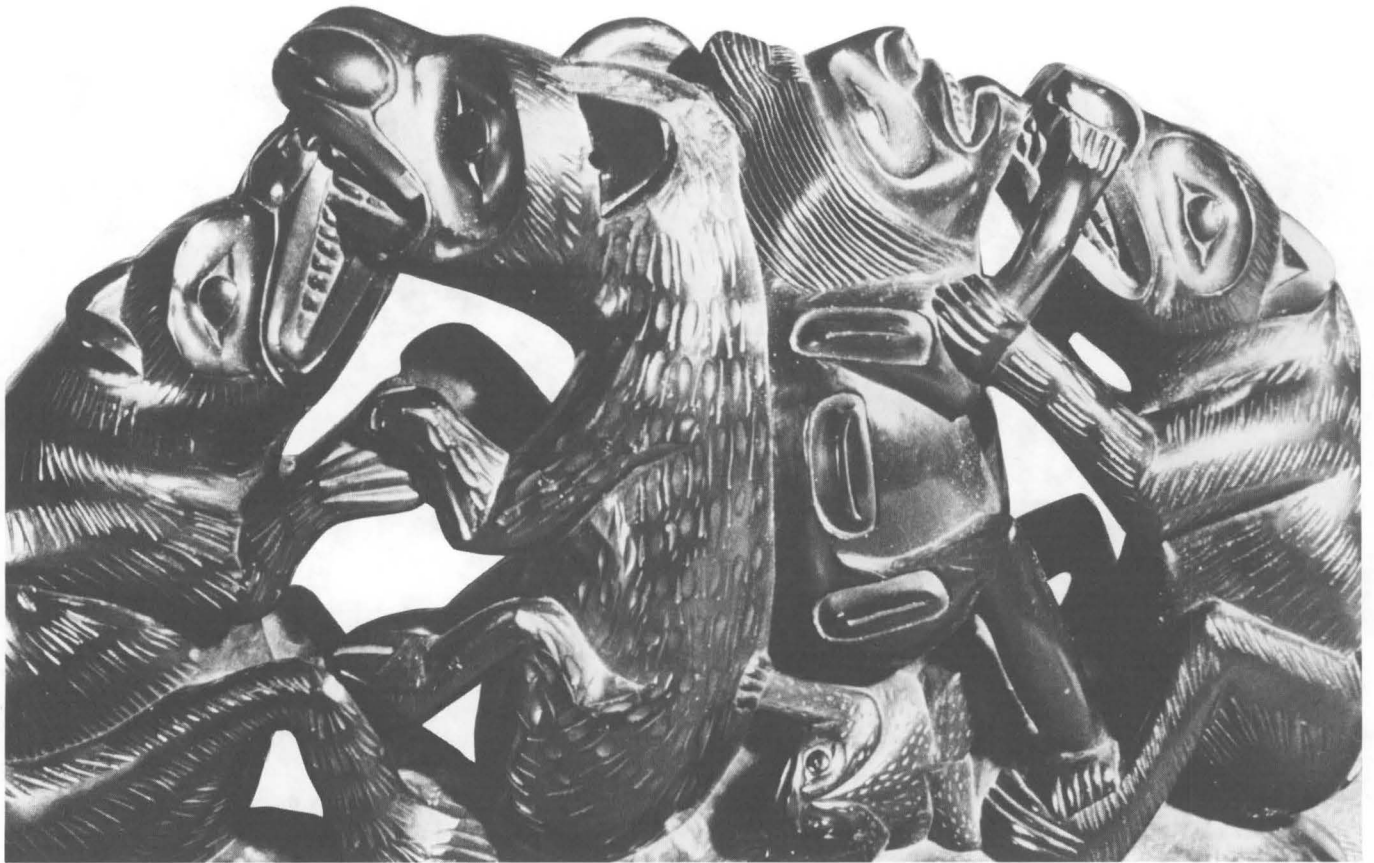


Fig. 3:20. Detail from an argillite pipe panel relating to episodes in the bear mother myth.

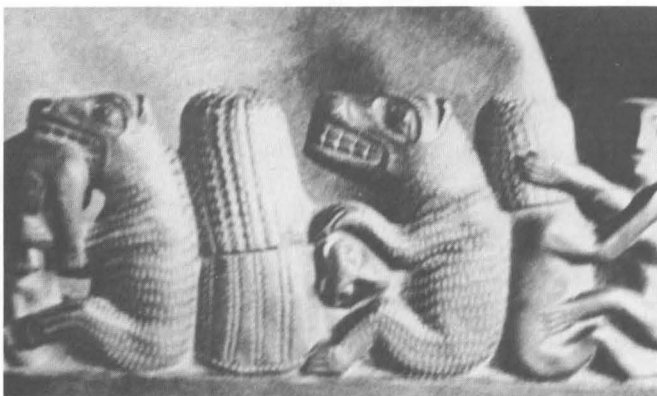


Fig. 3:21. Detail from Haida argillite pipe showing explicit sexual activity.

that is going on is not literal but metaphoric. This it seems to me is an act of sex which is shown half literally and half metaphorically, and in the crazy logic of Northwest Coast imagery, that fits perfectly. This, I think, is raven's original act of self-incest by which he created himself, and a very daring piece of sexual imagery. Sometimes we find it in a variant form with the frog. The joined tongue coming from the mouth of the frog, and in some ways frog's tongue and frog himself or herself or themselves seem to be associated with sex.

The roads lead to the raven rattle and some of the roads had to do with metaphorical sexual activity. I think the idea of a baton with raven beak may be a phallic male, and the thing that happens on the back of the raven rattle is perhaps vulvic female, and there is a sexual activity going on. There is I think this deeper level of sexual symbolism. Now I don't think I should have to say this, but I am going to say it, I don't think it is sex, pornographic sex or anything like that. This is cosmic sex, this is sex because this art is also dealing with the much deeper human concerns of life and death and creation.

I've talked a little bit about the problem of structural analysis of images. We have all heard of bilateral symmetry on the Northwest Coast, but this is ridiculous. An image is something that has content, but it also has

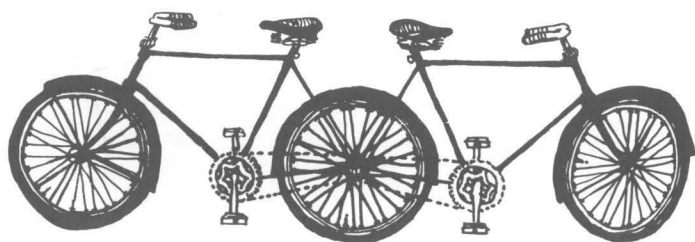


Fig. 3:22. Double images on a bilateral armature.

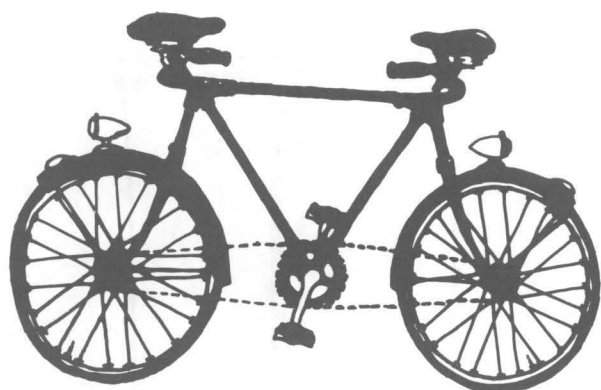


Fig. 3:23. Condensed double image on a bilateral armature.

structure. I have been trying to get at ways you can get at the inner structure of images because I think that half of the meaning is in the content and half of the meaning is in the structure. That is why the subtitle of my paper is "The World is as Sharp as a Knife." This is a Haida proverb in which half the meaning is in what it says and half of the meaning is in what it is. It is an aphorism which seems to contradict itself. It is the exact counterpart of a Haida image, I think, in art.

Now, the term I have borrowed to describe the inner structure of images is armature and armature is a term that Lévi Strauss (1969:199) has used for the inner structure of myths and so I have borrowed it for the inner structure of art, and I think I can see several different kinds of armatures in Northwest Coast images. One of the most common of course, on the Northwest Coast, is the bilateral armature. The two big bicycles in Figure 3:22 are described as double images on a bilateral armature. There is something that happens to images that you have to mention right away, and that is that they become condensed; they become refined down to a more tightly compact form. The bicycle in Figure 3:23 is condensed double image on a bilateral armature. So much for that armature. There are several places to find it in Northwest Coast art. One of the places I think it is most important is on these Haida chests Fig. 3:24) where that big creature



Fig. 3:24. Haida chest showing a double image on a bilateral armature.

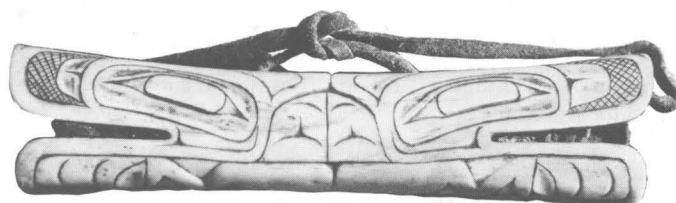


Fig. 3:25. Soul catcher, probably Tsimshian, showing the bilateral armature.

with the four eyes is in effect a double face. I think what we have is a double image on a bilateral armature and that, that is part of the meaning. Obviously I don't know all of the meaning but I think that is part of it. Now, bilateral armature occurs in all sorts of things. This beautiful little charm (Fig. 3:25) is probably Tsimshian, and is almost nothing else than a bilateral armature. It is bilaterally symmetrical, as we would say, and each end is a mouthed creature, a generic mouthed creature. The iconographic content isn't very much at all but it is expressing that relationship of bilateral symmetry. That is part of the meaning.

Now those of you who are archaeologists will perhaps understand now my excitement at discovering this little "whatzit" in Figure 3:26. This is a little stone piece, less than two inches long, from an archaeological site on the southern coast in the Gulf Islands. We don't know what to call it, so we call it a "whatzit." It is the most marvelous little piece of abstract stone sculpture that one could want to see; it also feels very nice; it's smooth; it would be a touching stone but iconographically what it is, is a pure armature. It has no iconographic content at all. It is a pure expression of relationships, a piece of sculpture reduced down to pure and simple; it is a marvelous little thing.

Now here is another thing (Fig. 3:27) which seems to



Fig. 3:26. Miniature stone "whatzit" from the Gulf Islands which is a pure expression or relationships with no iconographic content.



Fig. 3:27. Soul catcher, probably Tsimshian, showing the Triadic armature.

be on a bilateral armature, but actually it is on a slightly different armature which I call the triadic armature. This northern soul catcher is a thing which has two symmetrical mouths, one at either end. You don't really have to say what those mouths are. I don't think that in this classic form they are meant to be a bear or this or that or anything. It is just a big toothed mouth, perhaps conceptually the biggest toothed mouth you can think of. But there is a third element in the middle, a human element, and it illustrates the relationship of a triad. A triad is a pair of opposite things with a third thing which mediates them. It is one of the forms of human contemplation that is basic, and I think what the soul catcher is, is a triadic armature with very little iconographic content on it. Now a triadic armature pure and simple is the copper, which has two opposite things with a third thing that mediates them (*Fig. 3:28*). The two bilaterally symmetrical opposite bottom pieces with the third upper thing has the same except its opposite relationship to both of them. It doesn't have, usually, or I think ideally any iconographic content at all. I think a copper should be plain, although it is also taken as a torso and a face is put on the top. I think a copper should be plain, but I think by approaching the copper from this direction we are getting at its essential meaning. It is essentially an expression of relationships.

Now there is another kind of armature which I find quite difficult to illustrate, but a drawing of hands (*Fig. 3:29*) gets at it. It is what I call a reciprocal armature. One way of putting what is going on here is that a hand is a hand's way of creating another hand. I would sooner

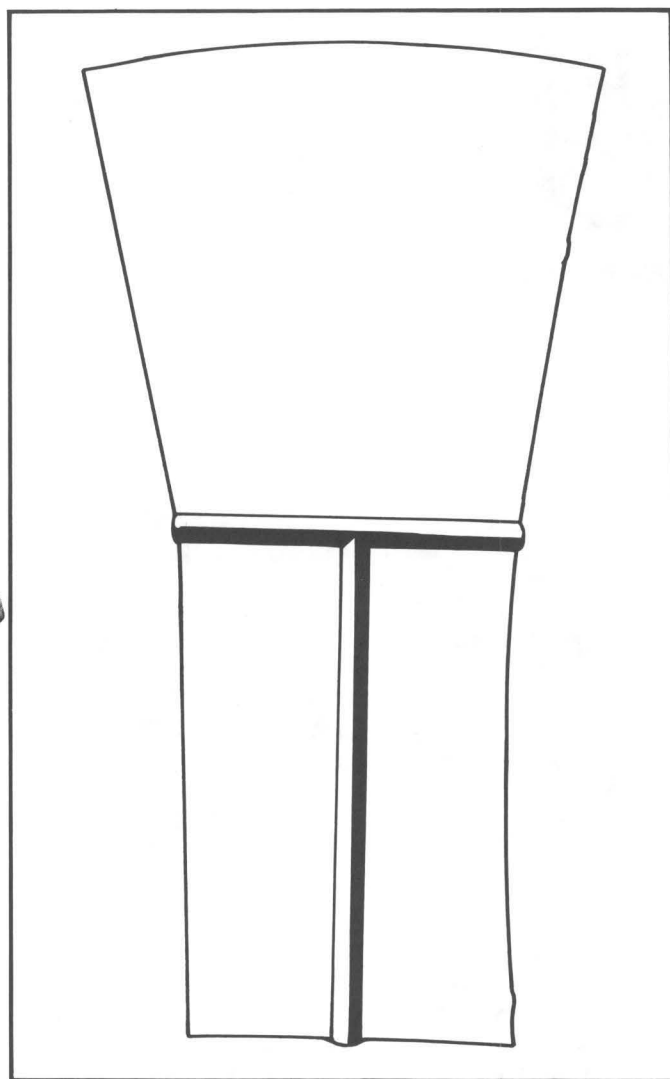


Fig. 3:28. The copper wealth object is basically an expression of relationships without iconographic content.

have had something like a chicken is an egg's way of creating another egg, where the two parts are different and have the relationship part and whole.

On the base of this Haida horn spoon (*Fig. 3:30*) is this image often called a bear eating man. This face is read as a bear and the little upside down human figure is called a man. Turn it on its side so that you can see the bear and the human figure more closely. Ignore the wings, there is something else going on there, and ignore the joined tongues, there is probably something else going on there, and see that the human figure and the bear are each other. They are parts of each other, and they are co-terminus with each other, and this relationship I call the double twist. It is a part/whole relationship where the part is greater than the whole. The part is the bear and it is metaphoric, the whole is the human and it is literal, and that combination of literal/metaphoric, part/whole with the part being greater than the whole is a type of

Based on the lithograph of M.C. Escher entitled "Drawing Hands".

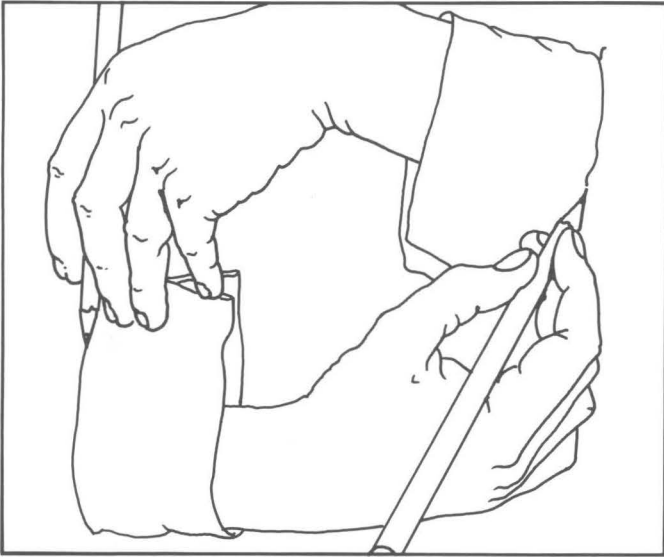
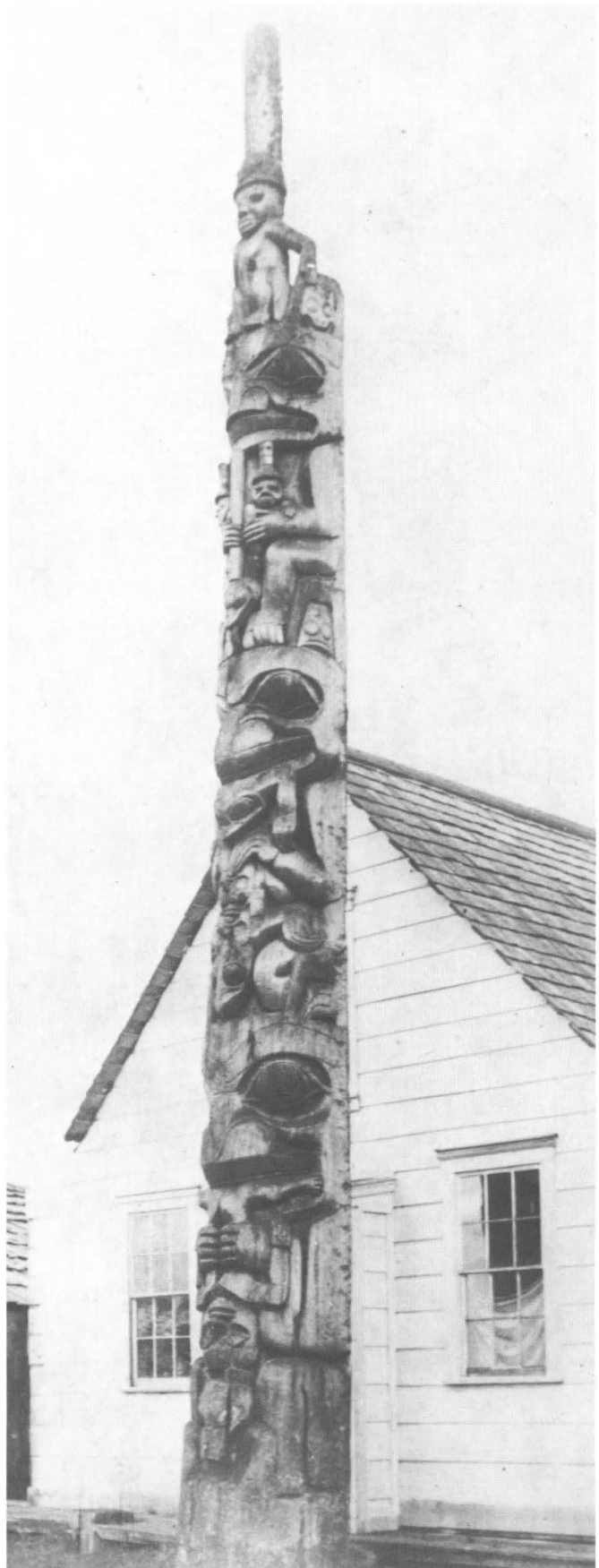


Fig. 3:29. Illustration of a reciprocal armature.



Fig. 3:30. Detail from a Haida horn spoon showing the double twist relationship.

Fig. 3:31. House post showing the bear eating man which can be interpreted as a vulvic symbol.



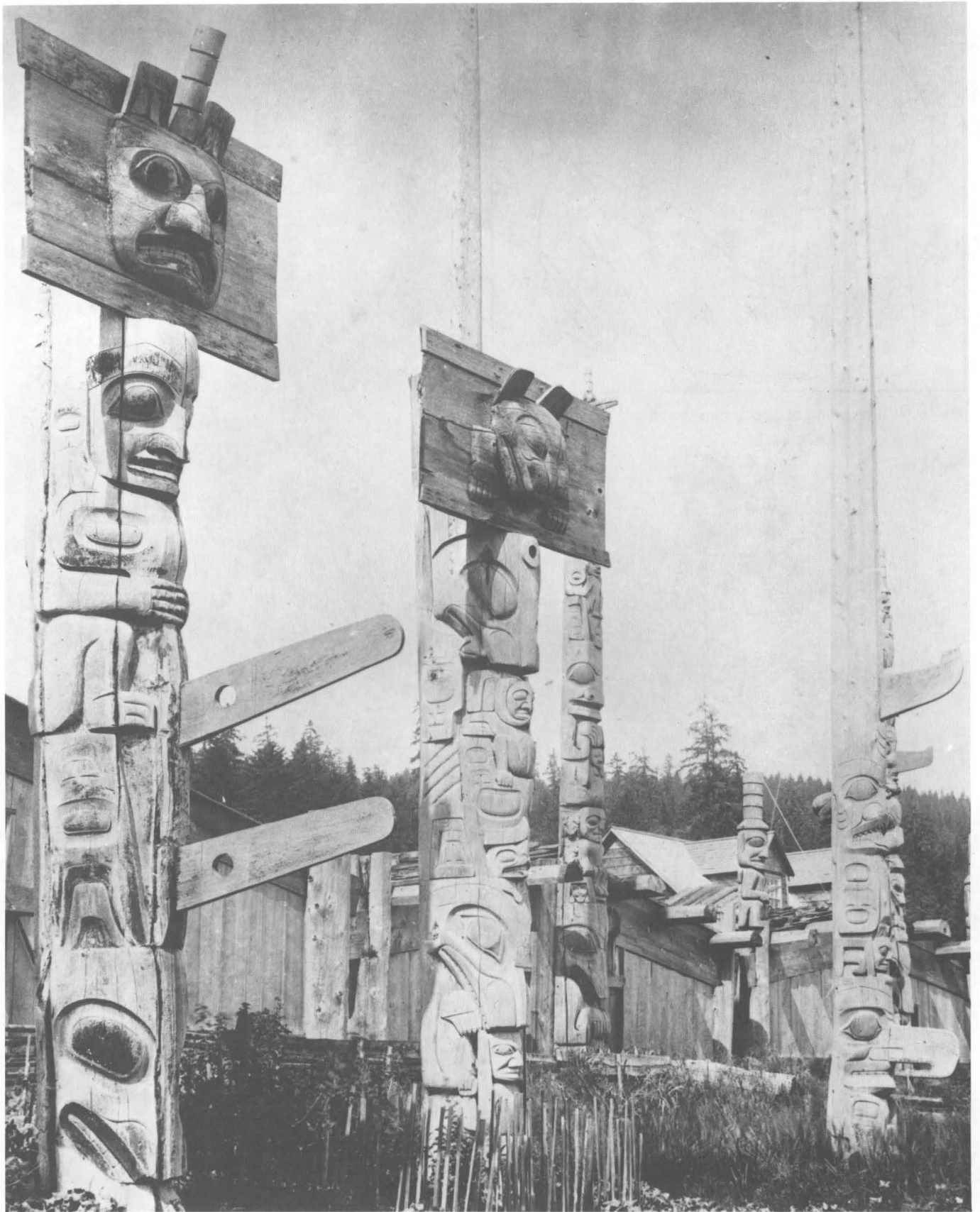


Fig. 3:32. Haida mortuary pole.

image you find on the Northwest Coast as that bear eating man.

On this house post (*Fig. 3:31*) we again see the bear at the base of the pole metaphorically restating the meaning of this oval entry and the little upside down human figure, a literal human figure with a metaphoric part which thereby becomes the vulvic symbol. So in addition to being a crest, if that is what the bear is, I read this bear eating man figure as a vulvic symbol on the base of the pole. You find it not only on poles, but on things like this mortuary (*Fig. 3:32*), a Haida mortuary with the little human part almost invisible, but the whole is smaller than the part; the whole is literal; the part is metaphoric and the whole thing is a vulvic symbol. Here we have this bear vulvic symbol as a tomb, and if you think that the clang relationship in our own language between womb and tomb is accidental I think you are wrong. This is a womb/tomb in the Haida, and has a much deeper meaning than just a symbol.

Now in concluding I would like to mention just a little bit about how these things get worked out in the art. Each image is the solution of a problem; there are a series of problems and these have to do with different artifact types. Now the word we have chosen for these series of problems solved is the word paradigm. What I have here is a hammer paradigm. We talk these days about house post paradigms, mask paradigms, panel pipe paradigms and so on. I want to give you an idea by tracing the outline of the hammer or hand maul because it is really a hammer pestle, Northwest Coast paradigm, which I worked out in more detail in *Images Stone, B.C.* The basic type is this beautifully sculptured and beautifully efficient implement (*Fig. 3:33*). There is nothing wrong with these things as tools even though they are also sculptural forms, and it seems to be many, many centuries old along the Northwest Coast. I see it as the basis of a conceptual evolution or paradigm of hammer types which proceeded from it.

Something went on with the armature of the hand hammers. Somebody turned the handle at right angles and created a thing that was the same at both ends, creating an image on a triadic armature. He made it also, at the same time a more effective or at least a comfortable implement that handles absolutely beautifully. It hugs your hand as your hand hugs it. There is nothing wrong with the thing as an artifact. It is just that it is also an image, a sculptural image on an armature. Conceptually, the next step was the stirrup maul where the two sides are the same but it encloses the hand and you have an image where in effect the grasper is grasped. Your hand that grasps the hammer is also grasped by the hammer. Then there was play on that armature, where instead of being exactly at right angles, this took on a slight slope and there was some play with the bilateral symmetry of the two sides. The fully evolved maul comes out looking

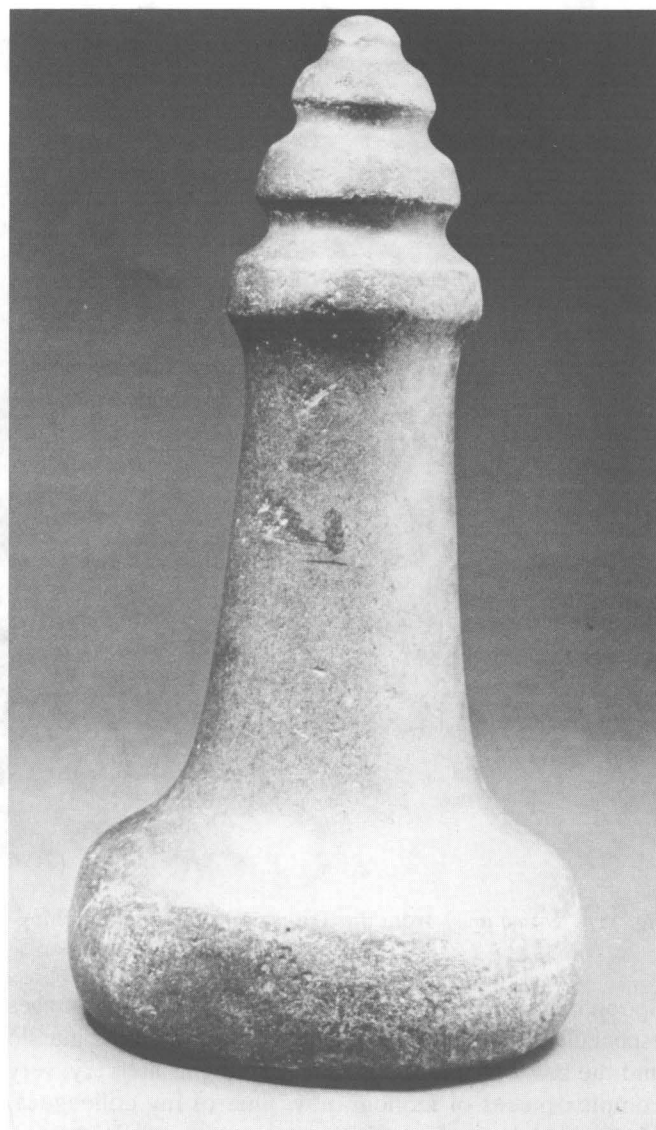


Fig. 3:33. Stone hand maul from the southern Northwest Coast.

like something that's eating itself. You will notice that as this process goes along that there is more and more care with the sculpture. They become clothed in beauty which is a characteristic of art as well. They culminate in the slope handled pestle or maul. It can be used as a pestle or a hammer; the handle is turned at 45 degrees which is half way between upright and at right angles, and I think that is part of the meaning as well. Now you don't have to see sexual imagery, you don't have to see that as an image that is phallic above and vulvic below if you don't want to, but for me now, that is part of the meaning, and it adds a great deal to the meaning of the sculpture.

Now there are other paradigms. There is a panel pipe paradigm. Panel pipes were formed that had their beginning at Skidegate slightly after 1815, and had a very quick development for two or three decades, into two forms.

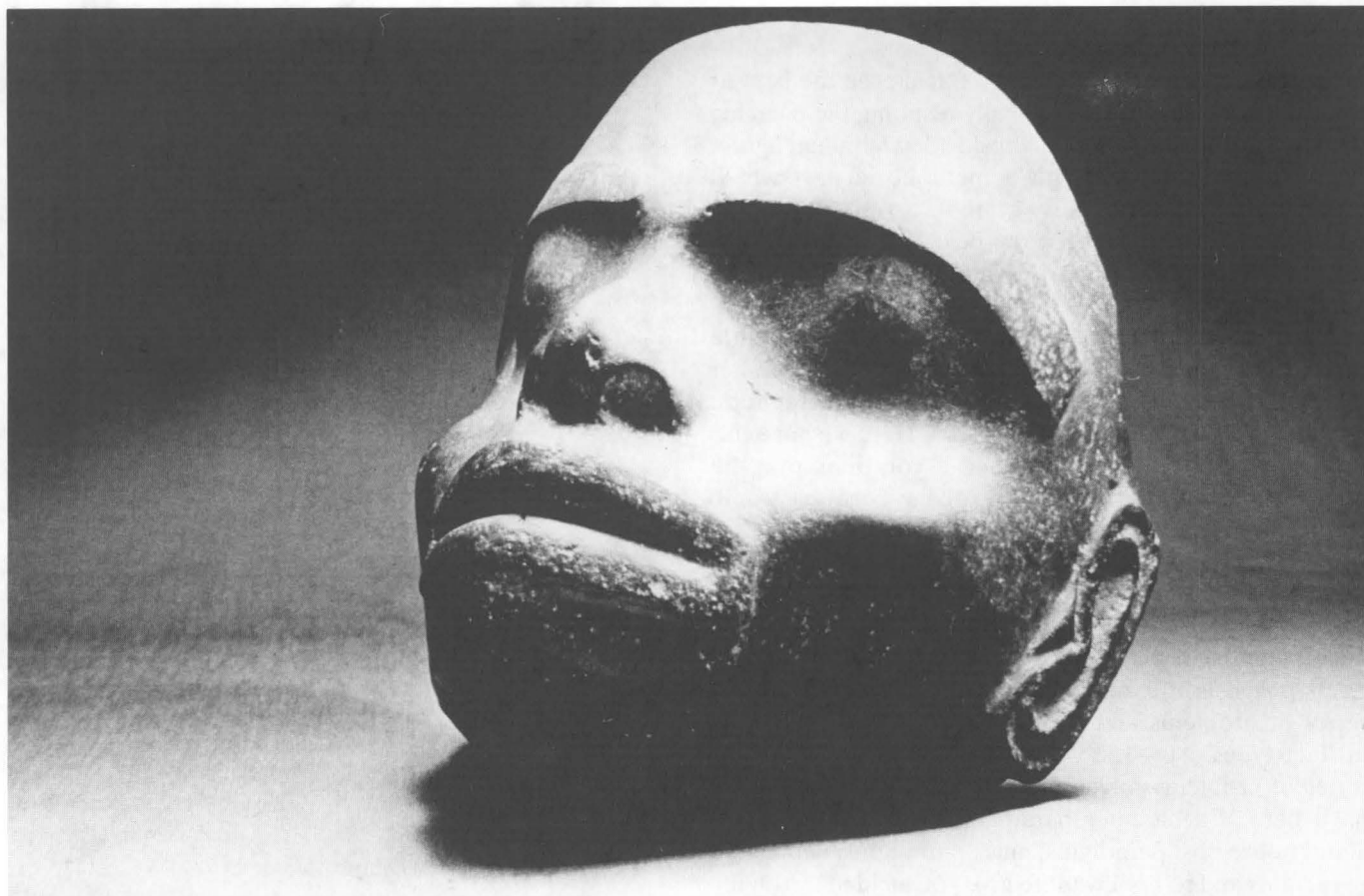


Fig. 3:34. Stone mask from the Tsimshian region. A matching mask shows the eyes open.

Spoon handles-spoon paradigms are very complex images especially at that point of the juncture between the handle and the bowl. Headdress frontlet paradigms are very, very complex pieces of iconography. One of my colleagues, Marjorie Halpern, is working on a mask paradigm.

Of all the Northwest Coast masks the one in Figure 3:34 has to be the epitome. This stone mask from the National Museum in Ottawa was the key image of *Images Stone, B.C.* It is an absolutely marvelous artifact slightly larger than life-size, a beautifully modeled, beautifully smoothed human face, a mask, these strange eyes, which being stone have never opened. It is half of one of the great, great masterpieces of Northwest Coast art because in the Musée de l'Homme is its partner with the same face, the same size except a little bit smaller in the front, and perfectly round circle eyes which being stone can never close. When we get to these masterpieces we are usually left speechless about their meaning, but the point I want to make is that the meanings are very deep, deeper than just depictions of a crest, a spirit or an episode from a myth, and they are not just decorative. In masterpieces like this there is deep meaning at all levels. There is meaning in the artifact and the artifact is part of the meaning. This is a mask which has to do with human

identity, and in this case there is meaning in the material, which is of stone. The eyes of the one in the front can never open and the eyes in the one in the back can never close. There is meaning in the armature, and I think the armature of this composite image is a triadic armature, because there are two opposite things in the masks and an implied third thing, the human face of the person that would wear those masks which would mediate them both. There is some kind of meaning there. I am sure there is meaning at every level. There is meaning in the symbols which come from the body self, from the eyes which have to do with seeing and recognizing. These are deep meanings. In conclusion I would just like to say that I think that the explanation of meaning of Northwest Coast art has lagged behind the explanation of form, and that there are deeper meanings, deep symbolic meanings many of them having to do with the human body self of which some show sexual symbolism. The image as I have defined it might be taken as an image, as a unit for structural analysis subject to structural analysis, and that some of these images have a life and a prehistory of their own and great time depth. Northwest Coast images have deep meanings, deep structures and some of them, deep time depth.