

CHAPTER 2

Form in Northwest Coast Art

BILL HOLM

My subject is form in Northwest Coast Indian art, and of course it is much too big a subject to deal with at all adequately in one paper. Without form there is no Northwest Coast Indian art. Its form, the two and three dimensional shapes and their characteristics, their relationship to one another, their relationship to the whole composition, and the final composition itself, enable us to recognize Northwest Coast art as an entity. The Northwest Coast is a long coast with many sub-styles, and the art extends over a long time period; there are many variations and it is difficult to discuss them all at one time. Some of these statements I shall make are not fully thought out. I know I don't have all the answers yet.

The Northwest Coast is an area known for its three dimensional, sculptural art, and yet the conceptions of form which underlie the Northwest Coast art tradition and link the sub-styles together are basically two dimensional. From what I have seen up until now, the concept of dividing flat space with incised lines or shapes seems common to all the early styles. The resulting compositions may be geometric, straight line designs, or curvilinear; they may be representational, or not. Somewhere along the line of development the incised lines and spaces came to be seen, or perceived, as a negative part of the relationship.

What I mean by the positive-negative relationship is that the recessed areas in these essentially two dimensional works can be seen as background, and the intervening, by contrast raised areas, as positive forms. If the incisions are deep and/or wide, and especially if the design is applied to a curved surface, the result then becomes effectively sculptural. In the end, I think, all the truly

sculptural styles of the Northwest Coast can be seen to be at least partially derived from a two dimensional space division through a continual process of refining positive-negative form. Early silhouette figures with incised features and detail are perhaps the immediate forerunners of fully sculptural work on the Northwest Coast. At the same time that the two dimensional art tradition was developing, I propose that it diverged into a number of different styles, each retaining some of the basic conceptual features, such as the raised positive-recessed negative concept, and some formal features such as crescent and T-shaped reliefs (or cuneiform reliefs as Suttles prefers to call them), the so-called Northwest Coast eye of varying forms, and skeletal representations, especially ribs and joint marks. None of these features is altogether unique to the Northwest Coast. You will find examples of each one of them in many parts of the world, but, refined and in combination, they make up the elements of a pan-coastal art tradition.

The transformation of such a straightforward two dimensional style into the sophisticated northern form-line system must have required the catalyst of painting. I see the techniques and versatility of a painting style, perhaps initially derived from the incised negative-raised positive concept, in its own turn refining relief carving as it began to conform to the painting formline. Figure 2:1 illustrates a bone comb from Prince Rupert harbour on the northern coast. It must have been from that period of refinement. It can almost be analyzed in terms of early nineteenth century massive formline design. At the same time, it shares features with the historic Halkomelem style of the southern British Columbia coast. The positive-negative relationships we see here are the basics of the

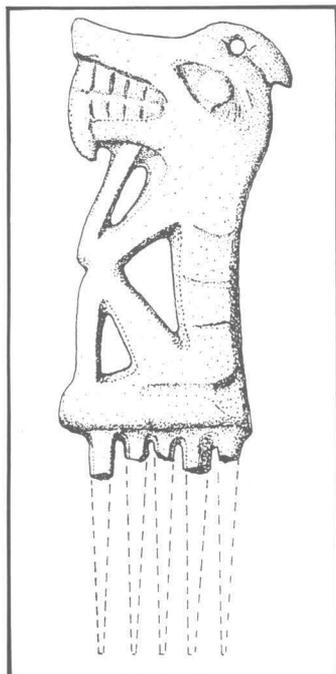


Fig. 2:1. Bone comb with wolf image from the Garden Island site in Prince Rupert harbour dating to ca. 800-900 A.D.



Fig. 2:2. Beaver bowl with continuous, massive formline design.

formline system. I like to refer to this relationship as the "donut theory." Maybe I should recite the poem from which the theory got its name:

As you travel on through life, friend
 No matter what your goal
 Keep your eye upon the donut
 And not upon the hole

If you remember that, you have a key to Northwest Coast Indian art. It's very important! The comb is an amazing piece, to take us back that far with the concepts that were later involved in the development of the formline system.

The importance of the donut theory, or any more scholarly term that one can give it, wasn't always recognized by students of Northwest Coast Indian art. There is a classic example of the failure of a person who really did understand a great deal of it and gave us the basis for our later understanding—the failure to recognize the primacy of the formline in a typical northern design—Franz Boas' description of this nineteenth century bent-corner bowl (Fig. 2:2) in *Primitive Art* is that "it represents a beaver, the face indicated by disconnected eyes, mouth and ears." The primary formline here which really delineates those parts is however absolutely continuous in the traditional way. There is not a disconnected eye, mouth and ear.

Another good example of the native artist's conception of the figure—ground relationship is in this applied shirt (Fig. 2:3) in the Burke Museum. It was collected in the

1890's from the Haidas. The dark patterns on the red figure of an eagle could be and often have been mistaken for positive decorative elements, artfully but somewhat arbitrarily spread over the design. However, if we look at the detail (Fig. 2:4), we can see what the artist's real intent was, in these pencil lines still remaining, outlining the primary formline of the body and tail. The body and tail were then partially defined by cutting away the negative (tertiary and ground) areas. So the primacy of the formline in this northern art is really universal there.

I'd like now to look at some objects from the different parts of the coast, starting at the Columbia River and moving northward, to see how the artist handled this form that I've been describing.

These carved bone or antler fragments (Fig. 2:5) are from the Dalles region on the Columbia and they're perhaps as much Plateau as Coast. But the design concepts involved are closely related to those of the lower Columbia and the Washington coast. There's a strong geometric tradition here, just how old I don't know. These pieces may be as much as 500 years old. They're good examples of the incising technique I mentioned and illustrate the idea of developing a positive linear design by cutting out grooves and triangles. In these small fragments the resulting positive, zig-zag, forms can be easily seen. But in this bowl (Fig. 2:6) of mountain sheep horn, also from the Columbia River, it would be possible to read the incised triangles as the positive elements. I believe, however, that they should be perceived as negative, and



Fig. 2:3. Appliqued shirt, Haida, ca. 1890.



Fig. 2:4. Detail of Figure 2:3.

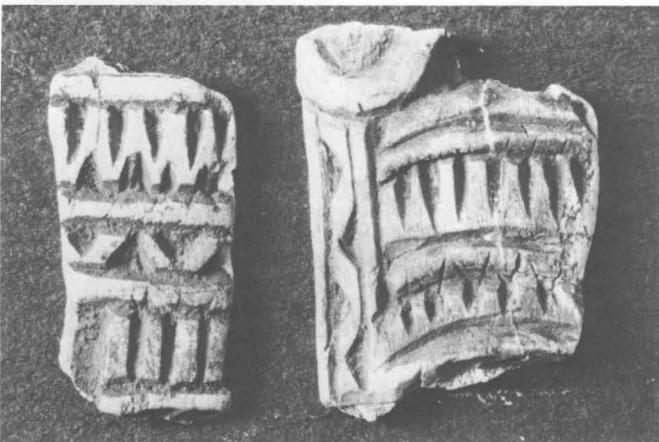


Fig. 2:5. Bone or antler carvings from Columbia River near the Dalles, Oregon.



Fig. 2:6. Mountain sheep horn bowl from the lower Columbia River region.

the pierced triangles at the top reinforce that idea. The bowl bears a typical lower Columbia rendition of a human figure: symmetrical, frontal, very geometric, carved on the bottom and flanked by the usual rows of zig-zags. This piece is typical Columbia River style, with the round head, elliptical eyes, three-step facial structure and small mouth. But how really different is he from some simple, flat, bone figure or even some petroglyph from far up the



Fig. 2:7. Antler figure from the Columbia River.



Fig. 2:8. Horn spoon from the lower Columbia River region.

coast? He has the large head, static frontal pose, crescent ribs and some of the other features that we see in other places. Now if you cut away the surrounding material, as in this antler figure (Fig. 2:7), then you're a long way toward sculpture. The basic organization of the figure is just as in the flat design on the bowl. There's more modeling in the limbs and in the kilt, but basically the figure, although carved in the round, is a deeply carved flat design. Stone was handled in pretty much the same way in the lower Columbia area, that is, by recessing the spaces and lines around the features, allowing them to stand out, in accordance with the donut theory.

Utilitarian objects can be sculptural even if they're not decorated. This one (Fig. 2:8) is decorated, but a plain spoon can be a sculptural form, and such forms relate to the rest of the system. This elegant spoon of sheep horn is sculpture, and it has the usual rows of zig-zags and a wonderful little animal on the handle in full three dimensional carving. The structure of this face on a straight-adze handle of elk antler (Fig. 2:9), flat with the forehead plane separated from the plane of the cheek and eyes by a sharply cut underbrow, with the nose coming down narrow from the plane of the forehead, and the small flat mouth on the chin plane, is typical for the whole southern coast. It is such a natural way to represent a face in its simplest terms, that the fact that it was so universal isn't surprising at all. The face is really fine, along with the elegance of the horns with their wonderful repeated curves, which are echoed in the circles; recessed, raised and bordered. It's really a fantastic piece, one of the finest, from the lower Columbia River region.

Moving up to Salish Puget Sound, we see another variation on the flat, ovoid face with the long nose extending down from the sharply cut brow. The modeling on the face of this spirit canoe figure (Fig. 2:10) is almost entirely negative. In fact, the simple line outline of the brow and nose is just a step away from this kind of modeling, where the space around the groove is cut away to leave the raised nose and the projecting brow. It's very close to the simple outline form. The entire figure is three dimensional, deep and rounded, but the emphasis of the design is frontal and flat.

This comb (Fig. 2:11) from the Halkomelem area is an excellent example of the British Columbia Coast Salish elaboration of the two dimensional design system which also gave rise to the northern formline system. Even more surely than in the case of the Columbia River lines and triangles, here the incised crescents, the triangles, the T or cunieforn shapes and ovoids, must be seen as ground. There's no way that these Salish pieces can be watered down northern designs. The concept of the placement of these reliefs is too sure and too knowledgeable, too perfect. In fact, the most certain point of breakdown in copying northern formline designs without understanding is in the improper use of these reliefs. So this is not a watered down or backwater copy of the northern formline.

This adze (Fig. 2:12) is a small puzzle without any documentation, but it has to come from the general Georgia Strait—Juan de Fuca Strait area. It's a beautiful piece with its flaring handle, fine sculptured face, narrow nose, eyes on the cheek plane, flat small mouth. These are attributes of Salish style. Those great, bold, T-shaped

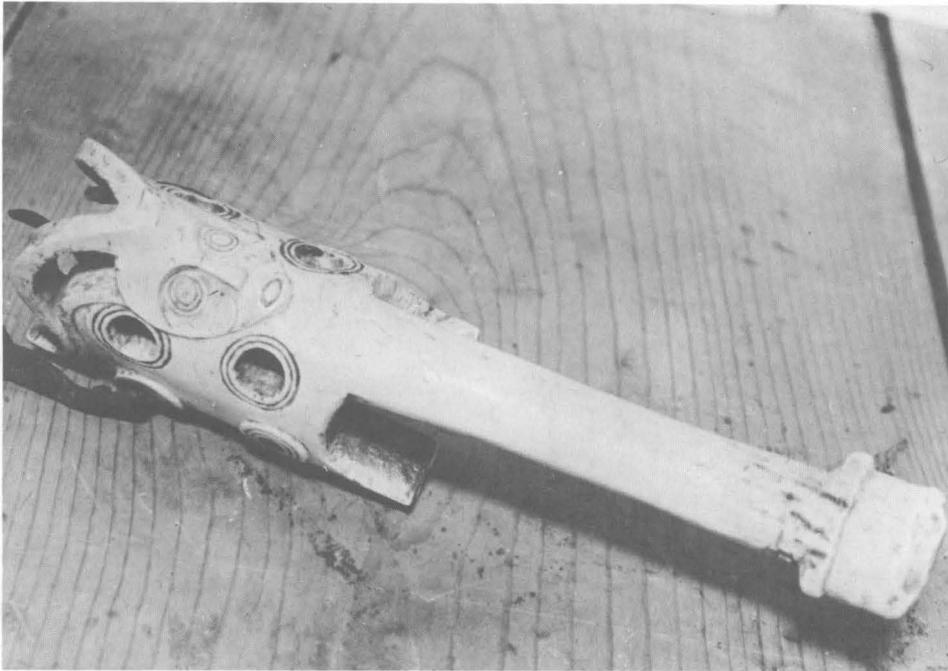


Fig. 2:9. Antler adze handle from the lower Columbia River region.



Fig. 2:10. Head of spirit canoe figure, Puget Sound Salish.

reliefs have to be thought of in terms of their relationship to the projecting, positive forms. Their very sensitive placement was certainly designed to define positive shapes. Those shapes which they define are, of course, real "Northwest Coast" forms.

One could continue by illustrating some further Salish pieces which are really sculptural with full rounded forms and yet with the basic structure of the face, the handling of the detail, in that frontal Salish style. Then to confuse the picture, there are the prehistoric seated human bowl figures, which in the structure of the body and handling of the details fit right into this old Salish system. But the faces of many of them, with their deeply rounded sculptural form, heavy, arched eyebrows over eyes on a full orb, distinct eyelid lines, flaring nostrils, modeled cheek structure and projecting mouth with full lips, are unlike other Salish carved objects. I don't know just where they fit in.

The handle on a bone club (Fig. 2:13) is very Nootkan, yet one can see its close relationship to the Salish system of incised areas, defining the raised positive areas. The face is a good example of how a slight bit of modeling can change this really lineal style into a sculptural form. Now it is interesting to see the similarity of this late nineteenth century Nootkan, humanoid mask (Fig. 2:14) to the bone carving on the club. The general feeling is almost exactly alike, and structurally they are alike. Here is a truly three dimensional carving but it retains the features of an essentially flat object. In fact the two sides of this mask are basically flat with only slight modeling on the cheek and nostrils and a long, sloping underbrow

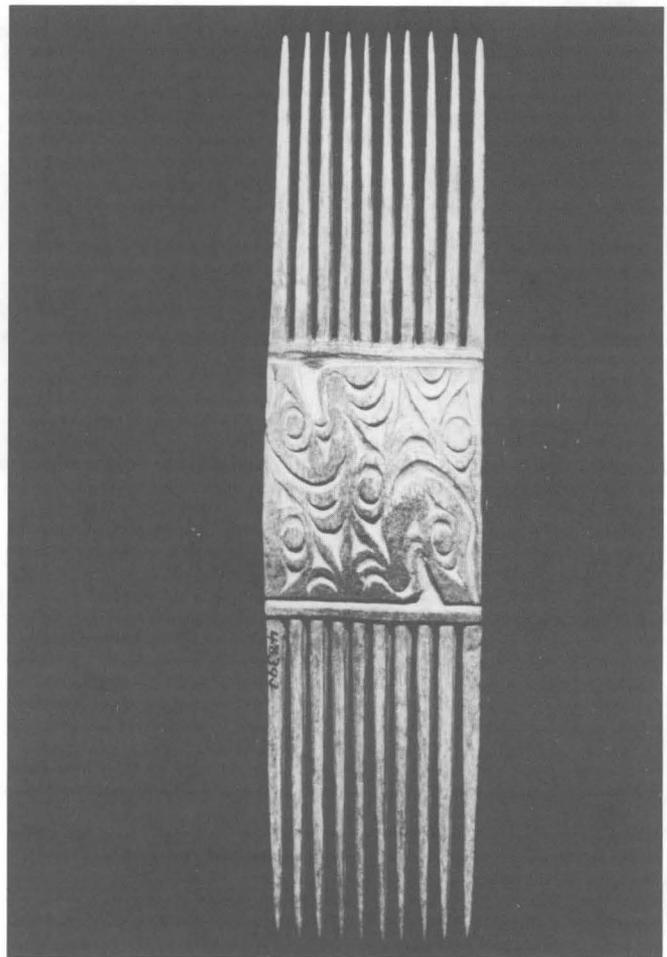


Fig. 2:11. Comb, Strait of Georgia Salish.



Fig. 2:12. Adze, Georgia Strait-Juan de Fuca Strait region.

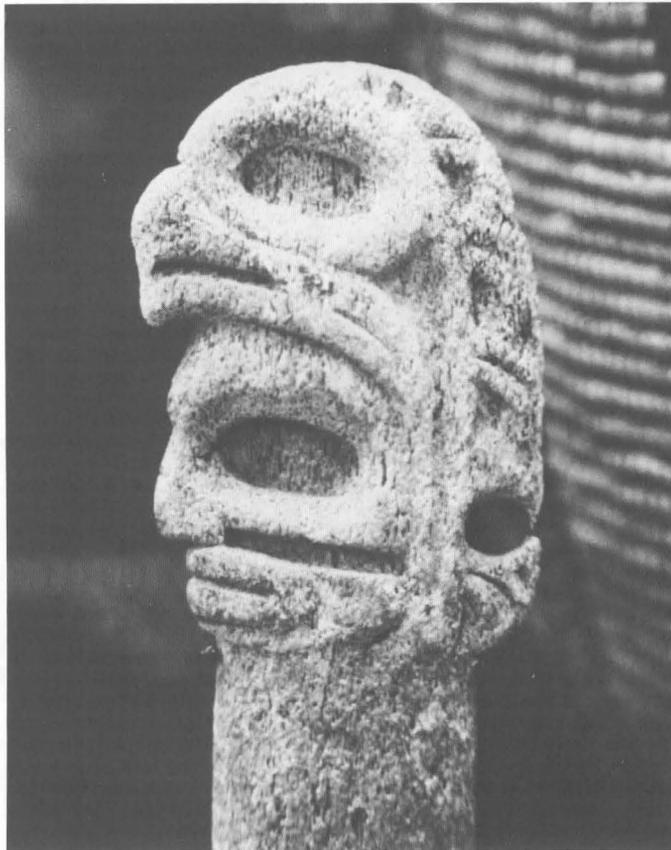


Fig. 2:13. Handle of Nootka bone club.

plane over the large eyes on the cheek plane. The latter is a Nootkan sculptural characteristic, somewhat different from the usual way of handling it in the Salish area. Many similar examples could be illustrated.

Even more striking in its resemblance to flat art is this constructed headdress (Fig. 2:15), a typical Winter Dance headdress from the Nootka, with its completely flat surface and painted design. The formline painting on the surface may have been influenced by the Northern system, but

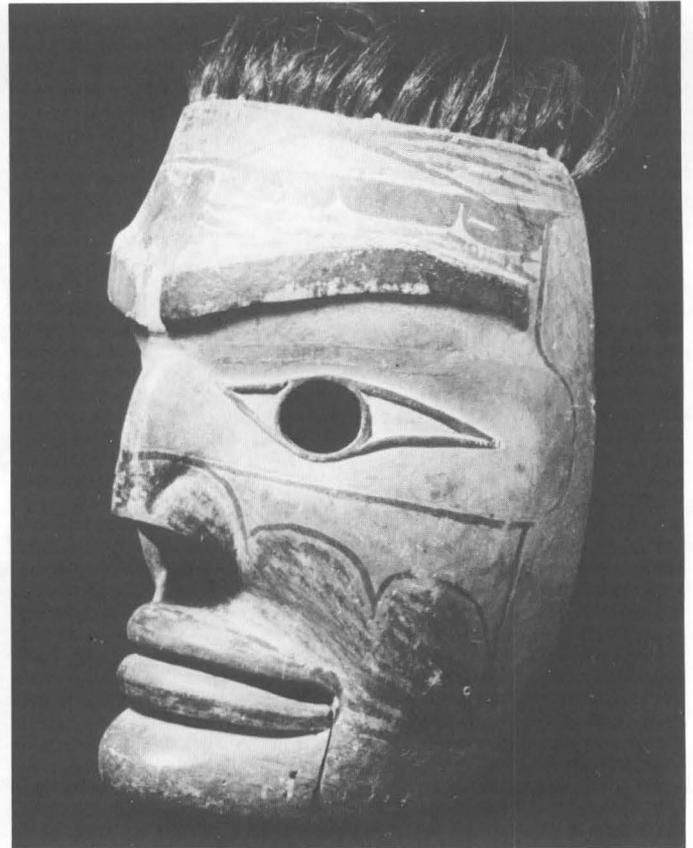


Fig. 2:14. Nootka humanoid mask.

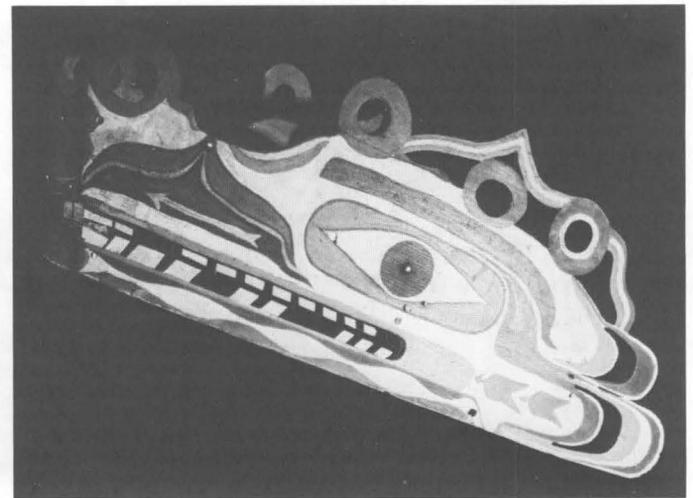


Fig. 2:15. Nootka Winter Dance headdress.

conceptually it is also related to the old Nootkan design principles.

One of the most impressive figures in Kwakiutl mythology is the Tsonoqua and this mask (Fig. 2:16) is among the most impressive representations of the Tsonoqua. Here is a creature with its own special characteristics so that the tribal characteristics of form are submerged. Its bony face with bulging forehead, hollowed cheeks, deep set eyes, strong arched nose and lips pushed out, all



Fig. 2:16. Tsonoqua mask, Kwakiutl.



Fig. 2:17. Kwakiutl humanoid mask.



Fig. 2:18. Bella Coola humanoid mask.

characterize this creature, as do the black graphite surface, shaggy hair, beard and eyebrows. This one might be the epitome of Kwakiutl dramatic sculpture.

Not fearsome here, but plenty dramatic, is this Kwakiutl humanoid mask (Fig. 2:17), and in it we see the most typical characteristics of Kwakiutl sculpture: bold carving, based on a deep half cyclinder. The planes of the face are deeply modelled and defined, with the eye on a bold orb set in a deep socket. The forecheek plane is sharply cut back allowing a strong mouth projection with broad modelled lips. The nose is prominent with rounded, flaring nostrils. Kwakiutl sculpture is often painted as boldly as it is carved, with contrasting details of black, red and green, often on a white ground. It's easy to talk about Kwakiutl carving as being bold and dramatic, but it really can be specifically described in terms of form. However it would take more space than we have here.

Probably the most easily identified tribal style is that of the Bella Coola (Fig. 2:18), yet it shares some basic formal concepts with Kwakiutl work. It is bold and direct; typically there is a relatively small, sharply defined, truncated cone for the orb of the eye. The underbrow plane and the upper cheek plane come together, with the side of the nose forming a sharp angle with the orb. There is a convex swelling of the cheek at the outer



Fig. 2:19. Bella Coola sun mask.

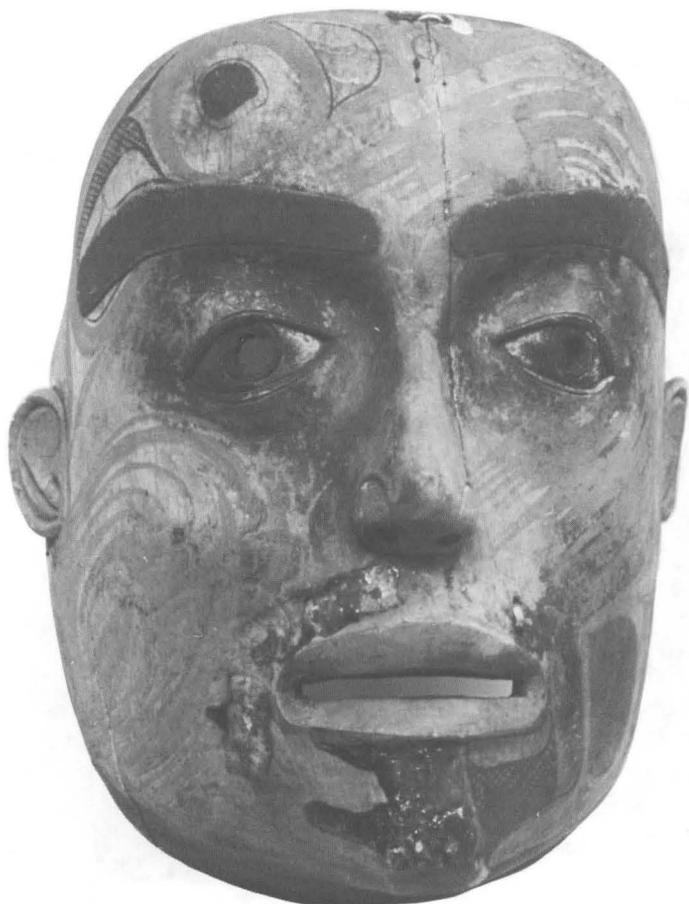


Fig. 2:20. Mask owned by George Catlin.



Fig. 2:21. Bella Bella humanoid mask.

corner of the eye socket which is typical almost to the point of being a primary recognition feature: I call it the Bella Coola bulge. It is a very typical feature, although sometimes absent. Unlike on a typical Kwakiutl mask, the eyelid line often is not carved at all, and eyebrows are heavy, often bent sharply over the temple. The lips on Bella Coola humanoid masks are unique and distinctive. They are more naturalistic than those of any other style as a type. In fact, with all of its boldness and fantastic elaboration, Bella Coola humanoid sculpture is based clearly on human anatomy.

The Bella Coola sun mask (*Fig. 2:19*) exhibits typical blue, vermillion and black painting on a natural wood ground. The painted areas on Bella Coola masks generally take the form of broad "U"-like figures separated by reliefs of either natural wood or vermillion, which must be seen and read as the negative spaces we find in positive form just as in the Halkomelem flat art and the Northern formline system. The complex Bella Coola pantheon no less than the imaginative use of sculptural form gives the Bella Coola artist tremendous variety of possibilities.

The mask in Figure 2:20 was once owned by George Catlin, the early nineteenth century American painter. It is an early piece. It may have come from the Bella Bella country, an area that is particularly hard to pin down

stylistically because the region of the Northern Kwakiutl speaking peoples is bounded by the strong stylistic areas of the Haida, Tsimshian and Bella Coola, and there is considerable merging of the art traditions. Styles seem to take two major directions, one represented by this mask (*Fig. 2:21*) in which the sculptural planes are bold and distinct, and suggest a northern influenced Bella Coola—Kwakiutl approach, and the other a more naturalistic style very different to distinguish from Haida or Tsimshian work. One of the problems is that we try to lump too much of an area under one name, Bella Bella. There seem to be features of Bella Bella sculpture which are distinctive enough to be isolated but they are not as strongly recognizable as the others. A flattened orb with a narrow and sometimes sharply cut rim in the eye socket is distinctive, for example.

This beautiful settee (*Fig. 2:22*) in the Berlin Museum is a very important link in the attribution chain. Adrian Jacobsen had it made for him by the best carver in the village of Bella Bella in the early 1880's. Although the name of the maker was not given in Jacobsen's published account I still have hopes that he may have recorded it somewhere. In any case we do know its date and its provenience, and it is also important because of the combination of very distinctive flat and sculptural work.



Fig. 2:22. Bella Bella settee.

The carved thunderbird face is in a recognizable Bella Bella style and the formline detail matches exactly with that on a large group of boxes and chests which we believe originated in Bella Bella, although many of them were collected on other parts of the coast. I believe that there was a native box “factory” at Bella Bella in the nineteenth century.

This northern mask (Fig. 2:23), which is catalogued as Bella Bella, was described in Swanton’s *Contributions to the Ethnology of the Haida*. It could be seen as either Bella Bella or Haida. An interesting sidelight on the painting is in Swanton’s comment that it is “another representation of cumulous clouds, the clouds being indicated by the white, triangular marks.” Anyone who is familiar with the donut theory will recognize the mistake of this interpretation.

Wingert expressed the character of Tsimshian mask sculpture very well when he wrote, “There is also a strong expression of fleshy forms and tightly drawn surface skin over these bony structures.” The effect of the large orb pressing against the eyelid is really beautifully expressed here in this frontlet from the Skeena River (Fig. 2:24). Some of the specific formal details characteristic of Tsimshian sculpture are the pyramidal cheeks, the wide, rounded orb and the eyelids without defining painted or carved rim.



Fig. 2:23. Bella Bella humanoid mask.



Fig. 2:24. Tsimshian frontlet.



Fig. 2:25. Tsimshian humanoid mask.

A profile of a typical Tsimshian mask (*Fig. 2:25*) shows the aquiline nose, smoothly rounded forehead and forward thrust of the chin, which is relatively short vertically. The three cheek planes converging on a common point are also characteristically Tsimshian. This feature is very pronounced here, in fact this mask could be used as a type illustration.

Totem pole sculpture of the Tsimshian follows the same principles, modified by the monumental scale and the restrictions imposed by the log. Tsimshian poles tend to retain the cylindrical form of the original material. The aquiline profile, short chin and smoothly stretched orb and cheek resemble those same features of masks, but the nostrils are widened and the lips drawn back around the pole cylinder. These features are shown in their most exaggerated form here (*Fig. 2:26*). The orbs are turned downward which is a northern characteristic also. The deeply cut socket below and the shallowly cut socket above is a northern concept which contrasts with the southern custom of depicting the eye on a more or less flat cheek plane with an outward slanting or sharply cut underbrow plane very much unlike this. The surmised two-dimensional ancestry of Tsimshian carving shows best in totem pole figures where the relatively cylindrical surface is relieved with modeling around the eyes, nose and mouth.

Many Haida masks are very naturalistic, portrait-like.



Fig. 2:26. Tsimshian totem pole.

The more realistic representation a piece of sculpture is, the more difficult it is to see tribal stylistic characteristics. But another aspect of Haida sculpture is much more easily recognized by the custom of placing clearly two dimensional figures on cylindrical or other broadly curving surfaces. Spoon handles are good examples of this aspect of Haida work, and this tiny raven (*Fig. 2:27*) on an elegant mountain goat horn spoon handle is really two dimensional; it is almost pure formline in all its details, and yet the result is totally sculptural. In reference to such objects as spoon handles, totem poles, etc., I would propose a development along the following lines: that a direct, representational, two dimensional, incised ancestor led, on the one hand, through the influence of painting to the sophisticated formline system, and on the other hand to a simple naturalistic sculpture, and finally to convergence of the two lines with formlines overlaying and modifying the sculptural forms. Another way of seeing it would be the two lines, sculptural and flat, developing together rather than coming together at a later time. It could work either way, but I think they did both develop from the flat system.

Another Haida piece is this fine grease dish (*Fig. 2:28*), combining a conventional bowl shape with head, wings and tail developed in formline detail. This is another beautiful example of the figure-ground relationship (the donut again) in northern formline art. You can never see the design by looking at the holes; you must see the positive, continuous formlines around those holes. We



Fig. 2:27. Haida horn spoon.

see here one of the most intellectualized, logical design systems in the history of art.

Single artists stamp the system with their own individuality and artists of a village or an area influence one another in the development of village or area styles. For example, nineteenth century poles at the southern Queen Charlotte village on Anthony Island are recognizably different from the less two dimensionally organized, interlocked and elaborated poles of Skidegate, in the central part of the Queen Charlottes, and they in turn can be differentiated from the northern Queen Charlotte poles of Masset with their rounded contours, separately defined figures and somewhat more dynamic arrangement of limbs and supplemental figures. Other formal differences of detail can be seen and isolated.

The bear's head on a Tlingit grease dish (*Fig. 2:29*) illustrates the tribal sculptural characteristics. The lips in a continuous flat band are typical. Although the piece was collected in the nineteenth century, it may well have been a century old at that time.

This crest mask (*Fig. 2:30*) from the northern Tlingit area probably goes back to the early nineteenth century if not before. It is one of the most perfect examples of the style of sculpture which utilizes rounded contours, with hard edged details derived from formline conventions. The subtleties of the form in the carving cannot be appreciated from the photograph, and need some careful contemplation to be fully appreciated even with the mask in hand. It is a real Tlingit masterpiece. The ears are



Fig. 2:28. Haida grease dish.



Fig. 2:29. Tlingit grease dish.

almost identical to those of the famous Tlingit twin stone masks.

The preceding paragraphs are really only an introduction to form in Northwest Coast Indian art. The following are the main points raised: The "donut theory" of positive-negative relationships, the influence of painting on the development of the sculptural system, the tendency to submerge tribal stylistic characteristics whenever specific beings are represented, the primacy of incising in the progression to both the painted formline system and to sculpture with subsequent formal interaction between the two, and the descriptions of some of the regional stylistic characteristics.



Fig. 2:30. Tlingit bear mask.

