

An Introduction to Ozette Art

RICHARD DAUGHERTY AND JANET FRIEDMAN

Ozette was a large village located on the northern coast of Washington, perhaps the most important sea mammal hunting site on the entire west coast of North America, south of western Alaska. From Ozette, canoe-loads of hunters would pursue whales, fur seals, dolphins and other sea mammals. The many thousands of bones of these animals in the rich midden deposits of the site testify to the skill and success of the hunters. In addition to sea mammals, the Ozette environment provided a large variety of fish, shellfish and plant foods. Large land mammals, including deer and elk, either were not abundant in the area or were not hunted locally, for their remains are rare in the site deposits. Ozette was an excellent location for a village. In addition to its economic advantages, it was protected from the sea by offshore islands and a wide rocky reef that provided a quiet beach for launching and landing canoes. One of the five main villages of the Nootkan-speaking Makah, Ozette had a sizeable population which was increased substantially each spring by an influx of sea mammal hunters and their families from other villages.

The village extended nearly three-quarters of a mile along the coast, but nowhere except at the point opposite Cannonball Island was the level area above the beach wide enough to accommodate more than a double line of houses. At this point, where the remains of ancient sea terraces step gently up the hillside, these terraces have been widened to accommodate a random placement of houses. Cannonball Island, joined to the mainland by a sandy spit at low tide, is capped by nearly two metres of midden deposit. It, too, was occupied, perhaps as a defensive position in times of conflict, and as a lookout area for observers stationed there to watch for whales. There was one troublesome area near the centre of the

village. During periods of heavy rain, houses located here occasionally were subjected to sudden mud flows emanating from a small valley located immediately behind them. These flows deposited layers of mud on the floors of the houses, burying objects that happened to be lying there.

One particular rainy night in late spring about 450 years ago, a massive mud flow, perhaps triggered by an earth tremor, roared out of the valley, smashing and covering the houses in its path. Most of the roof planks and beams were carried out onto the beach, but the greater part of the houses and their contents were buried under from two to four metres of clay. The midden between the layers of clay has acted as a natural aquifer for the past hundreds of years, keeping the deposits wet. At least four houses are known to have been buried beneath this one massive flow, and additional ones may yet be discovered. Remains of other houses, both earlier in time and later, are known from below and above the four houses.

Archaeological excavations under the direction of the senior author were begun in the summers of 1966 and 1967, and continued on a year-round basis since the spring of 1970 until 1981. Emphasis was on the recovery of the buried houses and their contents. Preservation beneath the mud flow is such that nearly everything in the houses, including tools, containers, clothing, weapons, looms and art work, has remained in remarkably good condition. Items of wood and fibre, materials rarely found in an archaeological context, are here in abundance, however those of animal tissue, hair, fur or feathers are very rare. Over 40,000 specimens have been recovered thus far from the complete excavation of one house and parts of two others.

Excavation techniques employing water rather than the

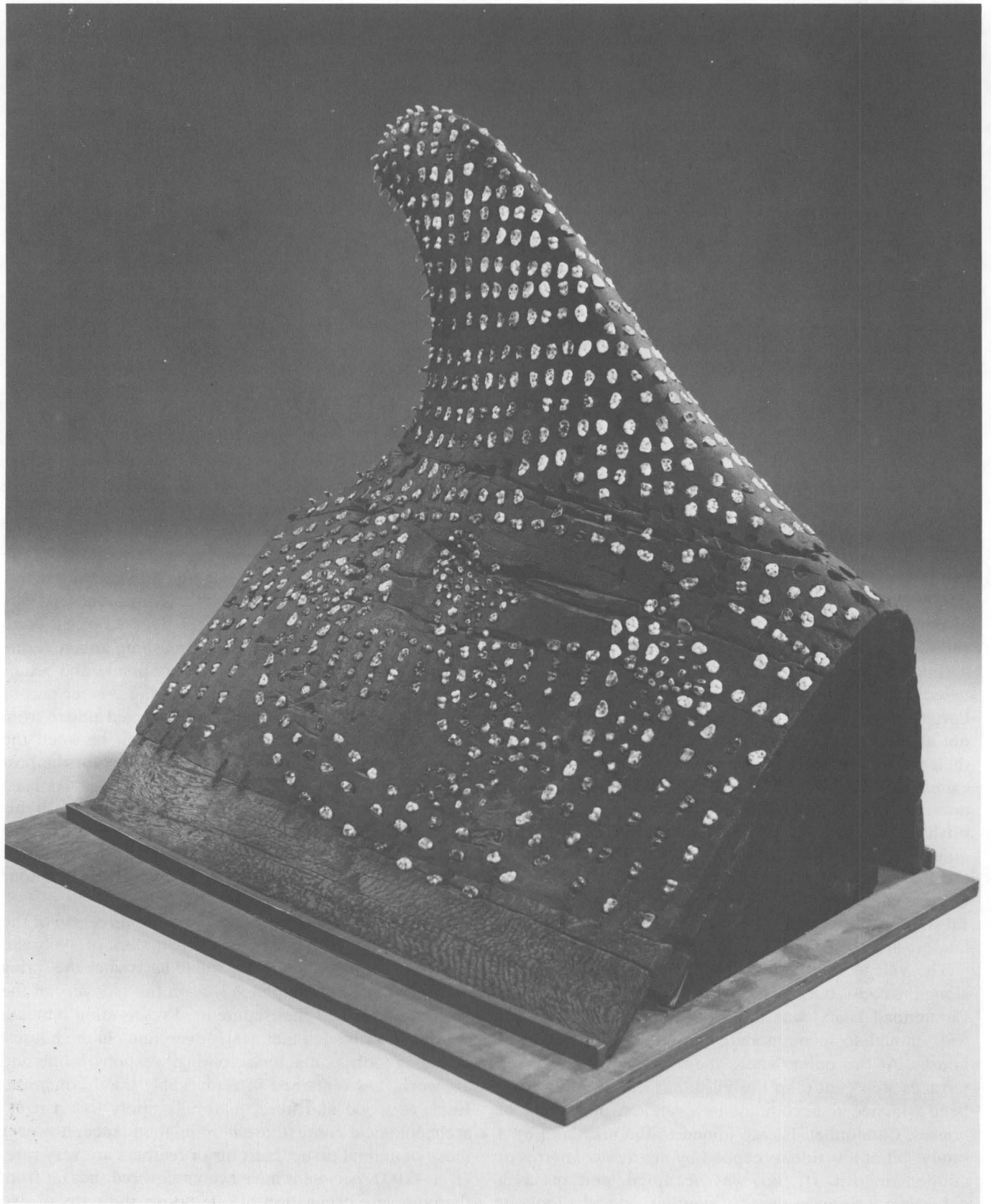


Fig. 10.1. Effigy of whale fin carved from several pieces of western red cedar which have been sewn together. The fin is inlaid with approximately 700 sea otter teeth, some forming the outline of the mythical thunderbird.

customary tools of the archaeologist—shovels, trowels and brushes—have been perfect to remove the thousands of delicate items without damage. Preservation techniques, too, have had to be developed to accommodate the artifacts and house remains. Study of the houses reveals that art was a pervasive element in the lives of the prehistoric occupants of the village. Even with excavations continuing and additional discoveries being made almost daily, it is important now to examine the range of the art and its role in Ozette culture. This paper is introductory in nature and primarily descriptive.

Similarities of Ozette to the art of the other Nootkan-speaking peoples, to the art of the neighbouring Chemakuan-speaking Quileute to the south, and to a lesser extent to the art of the Salishan peoples of the Strait of Juan de Fuca, Puget Sound and the Gulf of Georgia to the east and northeast are obvious. The priorities in the development of these similarities remain to be determined, and no doubt reflect a complex set of interrelationships. We believe, however, that the Wakashan and Chemakuan-speaking sea mammal hunters at the entrance to the Strait of Juan de Fuca developed a distinctive art style with an antiquity of several thousand years that, while resembling in limited ways the art of the more northerly Northwest Coast, has its own style and vigor. This view, at least to a limited extent, is shared by others. Philip Drucker states, "The Wakashan speaking groups to the south [of the Haida, Tlingit, and Tsimshian] developed a simpler but more truly sculptural and vigorous style, which stressed mass and movement rather than conventionalization. . . ." (1955:177-178). Based on unpublished ethnographic work that the senior author conducted with the Hoh and Quileute in the late 1940s, we are extending this statement to the Chemakuan speakers.

Materials

The Ozette people employed a wide range of materials in their artistic efforts, including wood, bone, antler, shell, stone, teeth and various types of fibres. Wood was the most important raw material in their culture and the one most often used in art, either alone or in combination with paint and inlay. The kinds of wood used depended primarily on the function of the various objects, rather than on artistic considerations such as ease of carving, texture or colour. For example, clubs used for killing seals often are carved in the likeness of a seal. They are made of yew (*Taxus brevifolia*) because this is a heavy, dense wood unlikely to split. Western red cedar (*Thuja plicata*) would be easier to carve but it would split in use. Studies by the junior author (Friedman 1975) demonstrate that the functional properties of wood largely dictated the choice of species in the manufacture of objects. Bowls are of red alder (*Alnus rubra*) or big leaf maple (*Acer macrophyllum*); whale harpoons and bows are of yew;

boxes are of western red cedar. All tend to be ornamented. Only where art objects were created for themselves or for ceremonial purposes did artistic considerations determine the selection of material. In these cases western red cedar was the dominant choice. It carves easily and is light weight.

Shells and teeth figure in Ozette art primarily as inlay materials. The opercula of the red turbins (*Atraea gibberosa*) are the shells most often used. They form inlay patterns along the front of sleeping platforms and in the shafts of whaling harpoons where they serve both decoratively and to provide a rough area for a hand grip. Sea otter (*Enhydra lutris*) teeth and pile perch (*Rhacochilus vacca*) teeth are inlaid into several boxes; the effigy of a whale fin carved of several pieces of cedar sewn together is decorated with 700 sea otter teeth (Fig. 10:1).

Bone and antler were used primarily for tool handles or, in the case of whalebone, for the manufacture of clubs. As with wood, these materials in their finished form were selected functionally rather than artistically. The Ozette people rarely used stone for artistic purposes. In fact they rarely used stone for any purpose other than as mauls, abraders, choppers, net and line weights and knives. Petroglyphs and a few carved boulders are exceptions to this statement.

Little can be said about the use of paint except to note that reds and blacks predominate. Where paint supplements carving and/or inlay work, it is now so faded that it is impossible to determine the original extent of the painting or the design.

Styles, Forms and Techniques

Ozette art can be characterized best as lively and realistic, dominated by zoomorphic and anthropomorphic forms. Conventionalized forms also are important. Sometimes they were used alone as on the heads of whalebone clubs, other times they augmented the realistic renditions of zoomorphic forms. Conventionalized elements seem to relate primarily, though not exclusively, to ceremonial-religious aspects of the culture, more often than to those of routine daily life. This perhaps helps explain the persistence of these elements through time and their widespread distribution among Wakashan, Chemakuan and Salishan peoples.

A strong element of geometric ornamentation also can be seen in the art of Ozette (Fig. 10:2). Zig-zag lines, parallel lines and patterns of triangles and crescents ornament combs, tool handles, the sides of boxes and the edges of bowls. Basketry was decorated in geometric designs patterned by the weave (Fig. 10:3), by changing the colour or material for certain segments of the basket or by false embroidery. A blanket of cattail fluff is woven in a plaid design.

Carving, whether in the round or by incising designs



Fig. 10:2. Wooden comb.

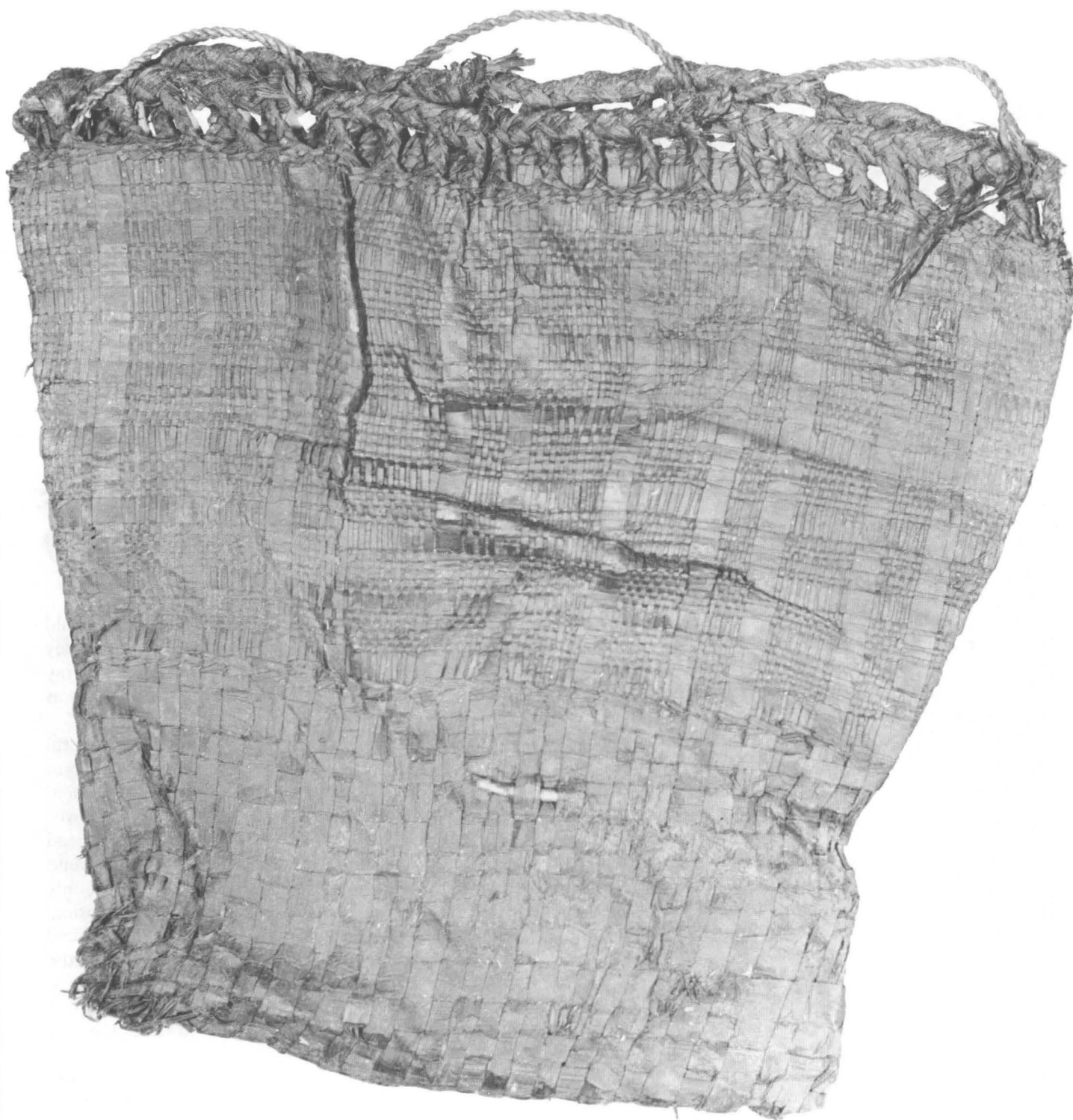


Fig. 10:3. Large bag used by whale hunters to carry their harpoon heads and other paraphernalia. The bag with its woven geometric designs is made of cedar bark.

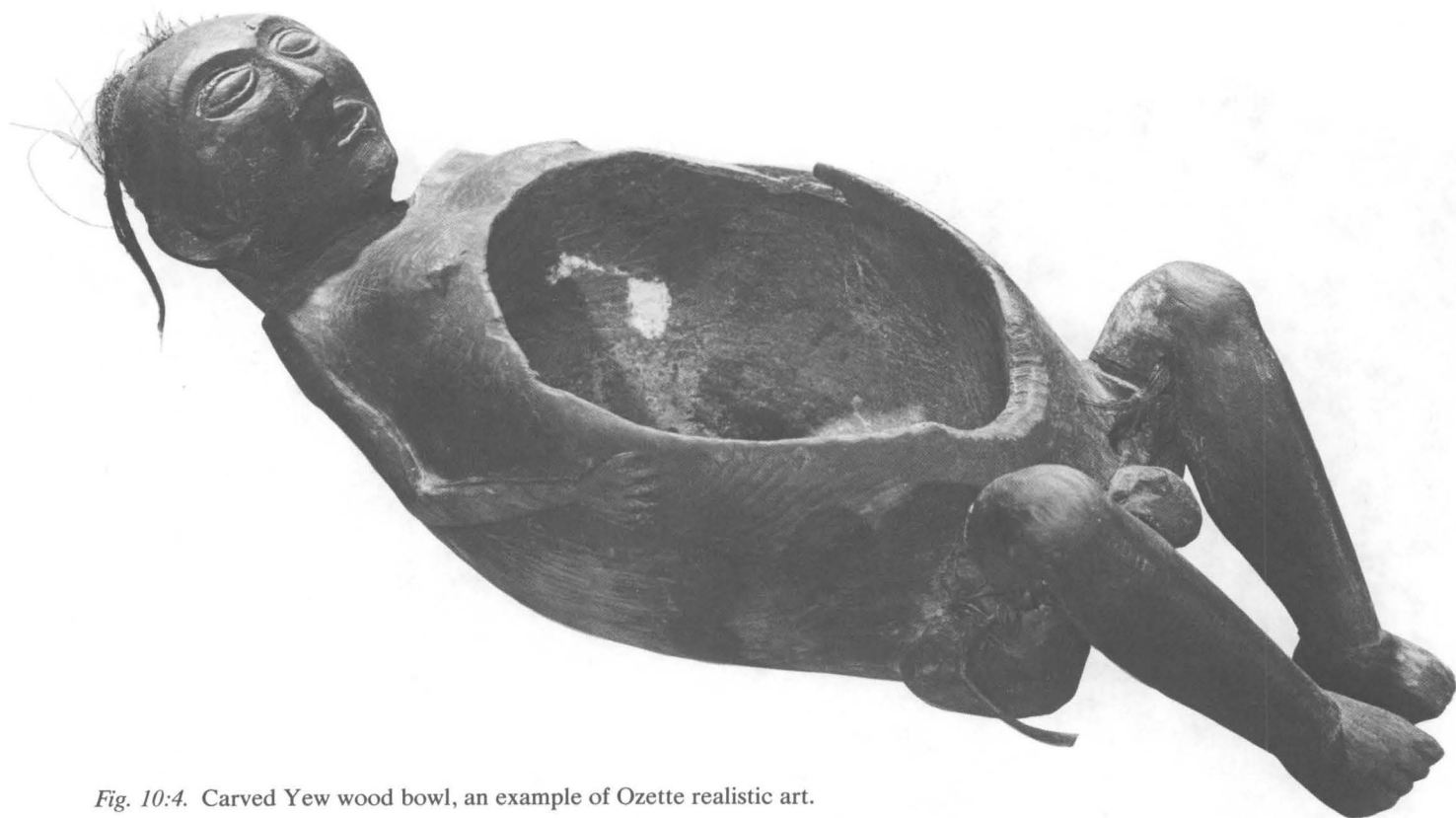


Fig. 10:4. Carved Yew wood bowl, an example of Ozette realistic art.

on flat or carved surfaces, is the most common technique of artistic expression, with the basic design often augmented by painting and/or inlay of teeth or shell. Tools were simple but effective: wedges of wood and bone; stone mauls, chisels with wood or bone handles fitted with shell, stone, beaver-tooth or metal bits; adzes with stone or metal blades and stone, metal or shell knives.

Realistic art is found throughout the Ozette collection, most notably on seal clubs and tool handles and on a bowl carved in the shape of a human (Fig. 10:4). It is used in depicting humans, birds, seals, whales and canidae. Frequently, conventionalized symbols or decorative element were added to the realistic art, creating a mixture of two styles. Several traditional motifs are identifiable, and were applied in any of the styles of art mentioned—realistic, conventionalized or geometric.

One of these motifs, the thunderbird, is incised and painted on a wall panel, outlined by sea otter molars inlaid into the whale fin effigy (Fig. 10:1), pecked into the dorsal portions of each of a pair of antler harpoon valves, carved in the round on two bone combs and carved two-dimensionally into a box side (Fig. 10:5). Typically, the thunderbird is portrayed with wings outstretched and body and head profiled with an eagle-like beak. Triangular tufts of feathers on the head seem to be a distinguishing feature of the thunderbird. The feet, when included, are more conventionalized than realistic; legs simply terminate in circles or are shown as single lines.

Whales generally are represented by incised or inlaid designs on boxes and on house planks. In each case, they have a stylized dorsal fin. Often they are shown in x-ray technique, so that the vertebral column can be seen as a part of the body.

The human face is represented in both a very natural appearance (Fig. 10:4) and in a somewhat stylized form (Fig. 10:6). It is found on spindle whorls, two-dimensionally on seal clubs and carved in-the-round on bowls, spools and tool handles (Fig. 10:7). The back of the head seldom is represented. Rather, a carving in-the-round will have a face on both front and back (Fig. 10:7); only the face itself will be present in two-dimensional incising. On many artifacts, the face is represented in a simplified and stylized manner. Within the circle representing the head, a single line curves to depict the nose and eyebrows; small circles or dots form the eyes and perhaps the mouth, if present (Fig. 10:8). On others, the features of the face are carved realistically in bas relief.

An animal represented in a conventionalized manner is a generalized canidae, perhaps a dog or a wolf, which has been found carved in-the-round on the handles of weavers' swords (Fig. 10:9), and incised on wall planks, combs and box sides. This animal is characterized by upright ears and an open mouth with sharp, pointed teeth or a closed mouth.

Mythical monsters, too, are represented in the Ozette materials, appearing as creatures with claws and often

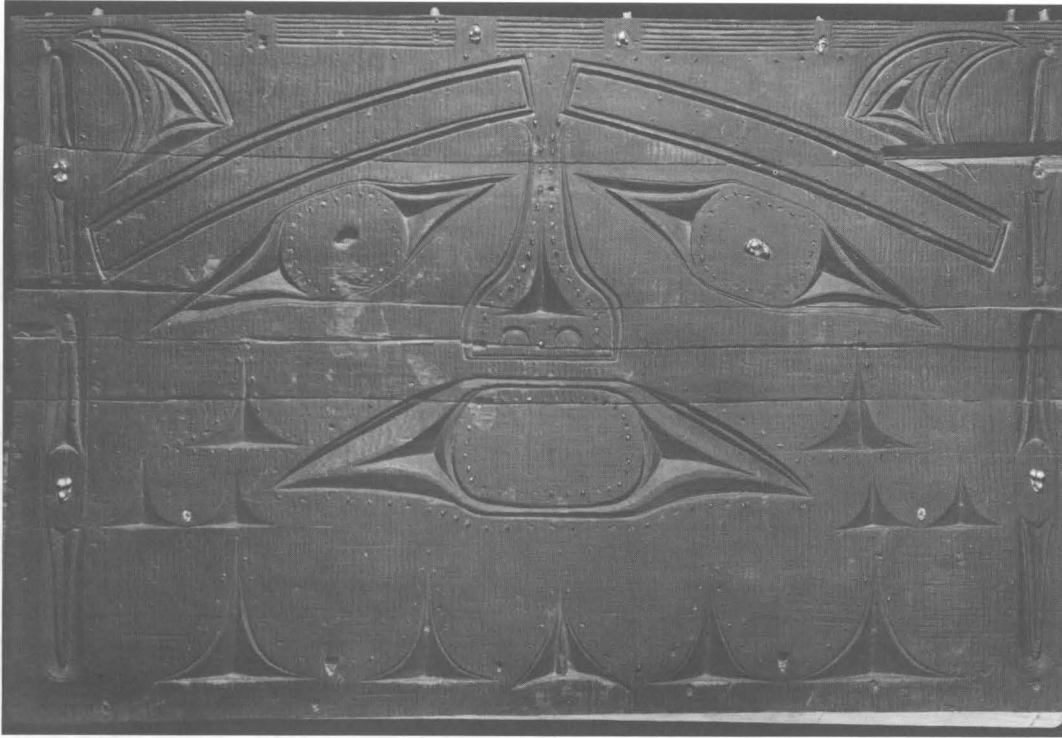


Fig. 10:5. Side of box carved from western red cedar. The tufts above the eyebrows and the feathers formed by the use of the pinched, inverted V's identify the design as a Thunderbird.

teeth. An example is a sea monster carved in wrap-around fashion on a comb (*Fig. 10:10*).

A single motif dominates all whalebone clubs in the collection (*Fig. 10:11*). The top or handle is an elaborately carved rectangle, incised on both sides and carved in outline to represent the full head of a mythical being. It always is shown in profile with a large drooping mouth, and a complex eye formed of circles and triangles. On top of the head is a smaller, bird-like head, with a long beak which is slightly hooked and usually closed. This same design with modifications and alterations is pictured on nearly twenty clubs in the book *Primitive Art* by Franz Boas (1927), described as having come from Vancouver Island and Neah Bay. This is a motif of wide geographic distribution.

Conventionalized style entails the use of numerous formal elements, particularly in depicting parts of the body. Although these are less strictly conventionalized in the Ozette materials than on the northern Northwest Coast, they nonetheless are unmistakable.

A design element which appears as a pinched and elongated triangle or a V is variously manifested on the Ozette artifacts. Most frequently, it is used in combination with an ovoid as an element in an eye design (*Figs. 10:9 and 10:11*), but it also may be used alone as a design element representing feathers (*Fig. 10:5*), or more correctly, the space between feathers. This is the case with two spindle whorls, and a bowl rim.

Eye treatment in Ozette art is managed in a variety of ways. In clubs, combs, box parts, tool handles, spindle whorls and house planks, the eyes of humans, seals, canine forms, whales and birds often are simply incised circles or ovals (*Fig. 10:8*). Alternatively, a compound incised eye, consisting of two or more concentric ovals may be used. This form most frequently depicts the human eye and may be seen, for example, on a bowl shaped like a human (*Fig. 10:4*) and on a tool handle (*Fig. 10:7*). Compound ovals are used also for the eye of a monster on a comb (*Fig. 10:10*), and on a small carving of a seal. Eyes may be inlaid with shells or teeth; on some artifacts a depression, presumably once holding an inlay, represents the eye. This is the case with the carved side of a box (*Fig. 10:5*), a seal club and a bird on a carved plank. In one human representation, eyes are incised horizontal slits. In birds depicted on one particular bone comb and on several whalebone clubs, the face is in profile and the eye is a round drilled hole passing completely through the object. The hole may have served to hold a thong or strap, especially on the clubs. On an owl carved of wood, large, round eyes are raised in bas relief (*Fig. 10:12*). Most common of all, eyes are represented as a complex combination of ovals and triangles. This is true for birds, canidae (*Fig. 10:9*) and stylized beings (*Fig. 10:5, Fig. 10:10*), although seldom for the eyes of humans. The combination is found on harpoon valves, weavers' swords, box parts, whalebone clubs and house planks. The same



Fig. 10:6. Whalebone tool handle with a realistic, though somewhat stylized, representation of the human face.



Fig. 10:7. Human face on the handle of a carving tool. A nearly identical face appears on the reverse side.

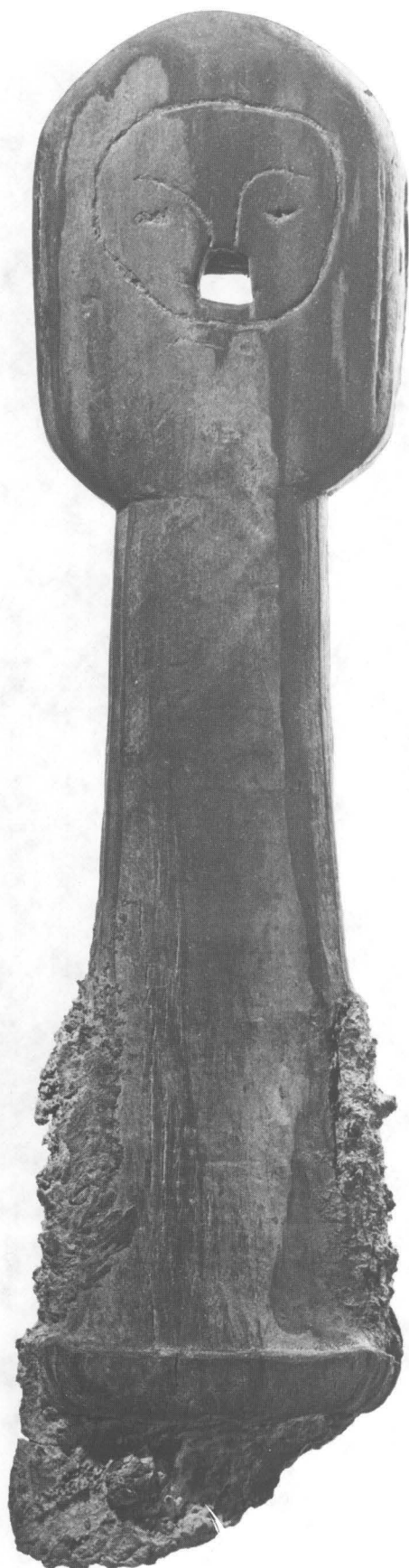


Fig. 10:8. Handle of metal bladed knife, showing a simple, stylized human face.

design, as a decorative element away from the context of the face, is used to decorate the rim of a bowl, a box part, a comb and a spindle whorl. The design itself varies considerably from piece to piece. The ovoid portion may be a simple circle or oval, a combination of concentric ovals or a circle within an oval. There may be one triangle, two opposite each other or, in one case, three. On fifteen different artifacts, triangles are enclosed within an oval.

The brow ridge or eyebrow often is seen in Ozette art, particularly in representations of the faces of humans and owls (Figs. 10:4, 10:6, 10:7, 10:12, 10:13 and 10:14). Frequently, the eyebrows are joined to the nose and appear as incised lines or in bas relief (Fig. 10:8). A brow ridge of sorts on many seal cubs is a sharply sloping demarcation between the curve of the top of the head and the face. An incised line or one raised in bas relief depicting simplified arched eyebrows attached to a rectangular or triangular nose also is frequent. It is used to represent humans or tool handles (Fig. 10:8), combs, spindle whorls and sculptures.

The treatment of the nose ranges from a complex shape, completely outlined and filled with inlay (Fig. 10:5), to an absence of any representation whatsoever. Most commonly, whether in bas relief or in the round, a human nose, a seal rostrum or a bird beak is carved realistically, with incised dots to depict the nostrils. A realistic human nose is seen on a two-headed spoon (Fig. 10:13), on a bowl (Fig. 10:4) and on tool handles (Figs. 10:6, 10:7). Figures 10:11 and 10:12 illustrate the realistic representation of a bird's beak.

The human mouth most commonly is represented open, with slightly prominent lips (Figs. 10:4, 10:6, and 10:7). This is the case on tool handles, combs, sculptures and bowls; it also is true of seal heads on seal clubs, with the generalized canidae heads on tool handles and bowls, and with the carving of birds on combs. An alternate, and less frequently employed treatment of the mouth, depicts it open and with tongue or pointed teeth protruding. This usually is in carvings of seals and canidae (Fig. 10:9), but it also is true of one seal club with a human face, several bowl sculptures, tool handles, a comb and a spindle whorl. The mouth, conveyed as a simple or compound oval, is a form restricted to human representations. The mouth is an open, hooked beak on most thunderbird depictions (Fig. 10:1), including those on combs, harpoon valves, whalebone clubs (Fig. 10:11) and a plank.

Ears are represented only infrequently in either conventionalized or realistic art. The only instance in the Ozette collection of human ear characterization is on a very true to life representation on the human-shaped bowl. Here the ears are located in their natural position on either side of the head (Fig. 10:4). Because human figures carved in-the-round most commonly have two faces and no back of the head, they rarely are given ears (Fig.

10:7). Animal ears are represented two basic ways. When a canidae is shown in profile incised into a flat surface, the ears are triangles, pointed and upright. This is the case on house planks, a comb, and on weavers' swords. On carvings done in-the-round, the ears appear as ridges on top of the head. Examples are some of the bowls, a mat creaser, a tool handle and a weaver's sword (Fig. 10:9).

The general absence of ears noted above is rather interesting in the case of the Ozette carved wooden seal clubs. Of the forty in the collection, none has external ears. This is surprising because the bones of northern fur seal (*Callorhinus ursinus*) comprise over eighty percent of the total faunal collection from the site thus far analyzed. This genus belongs to the eared seals. Since this feature also is usually absent on representations of humans, it may have been considered one to be stylized. Also, since these carvings were used as clubs, any carved projections soon would have been knocked off.

Feathers, often outlined by elongated triangles (Fig. 10:5), show most clearly as triangles hanging from the outstretched wings of birds. Examples are on a large, carved wall panel, a comb and house planks. Occasionally, open triangles or V's are incised over the body of the bird to represent feathers. Other designs used for this purpose are cross-hatching, parallel lines or randomly placed incised dots.

Hair rarely is shown in Ozette art, apparently for a variety of reasons. Often a face is incised as a circle enclosing stylized features, and neither hair nor ears is added to the simple outline. The human head also often is depicted as wearing a rain hat, which covers the hair at the top of the head. The only instance with hair clearly present is the bowl carved in the shape of a man (Fig. 10:4). On this piece, actual human hair has been fixed into a groove with pitch incised into the top of the head; the hair has been plaited into a single braid.

Very seldom is the body, especially the human body, represented in any detail in the Ozette collection. The only two pieces showing a complete human body are a small bone sculpture of a man in the fetal position (Fig. 10:14) and the wooden bowl carved in the shape of a man (Fig. 10:4), this latter previously noted for its unusual realism. Animal bodies generally are not represented. Human and other mammals usually appear as a head alone, generally incised on a flat surface such as a spindle whorl or box part. Or, a head, carved in the round, rests on an amorphous shaft or ovoid rather than on a body. This is seen in seal clubs, tool handles (Fig. 10:7), a spool (Fig. 10:13) and weavers' swords (Fig. 10:9). When the full body is shown, often it is stylized, carved in response to the function of the tool and the available design space rather than because of artistic considerations. A seal club may have flippers and tail carved onto its shaft, but even so the body of the seal is generalized. On a house plank

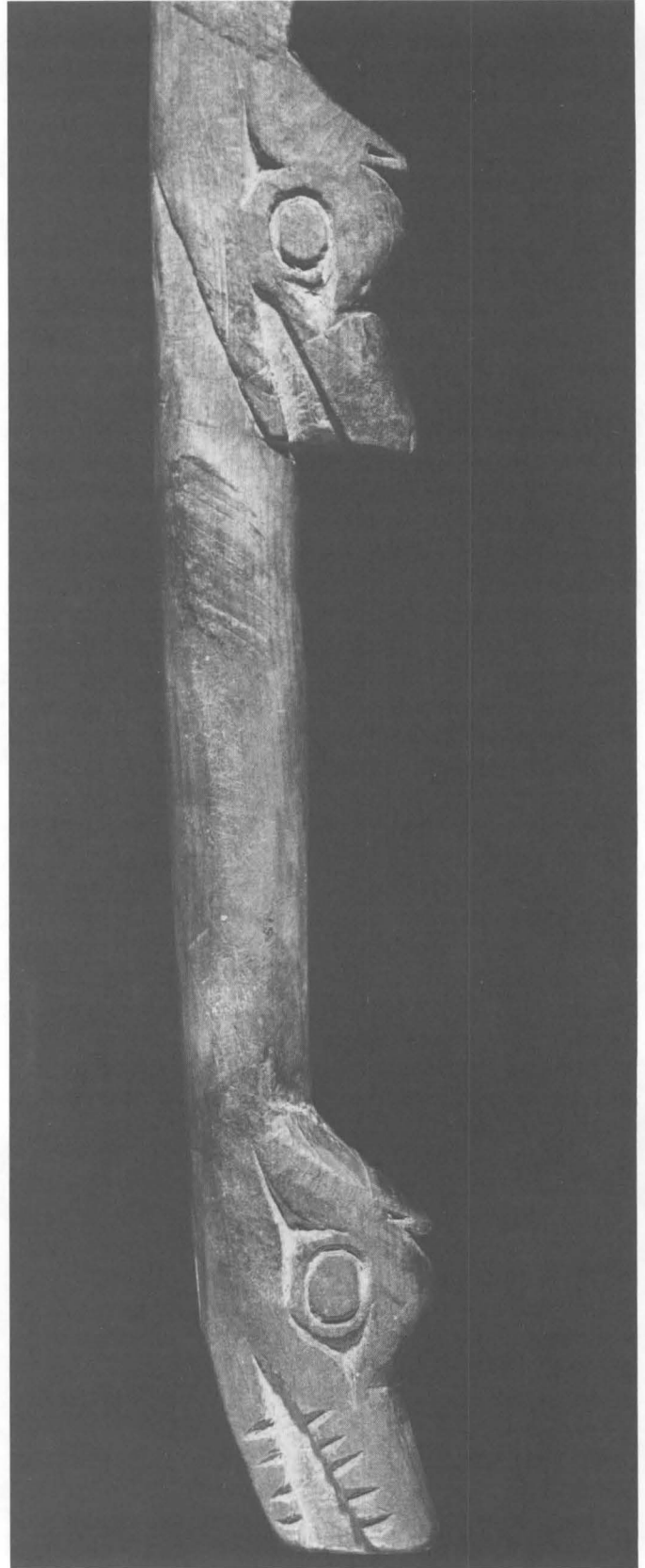


Fig. 10.9. Heads of generalized canidae (dog or wolf) carved on handle of weaver's sword.

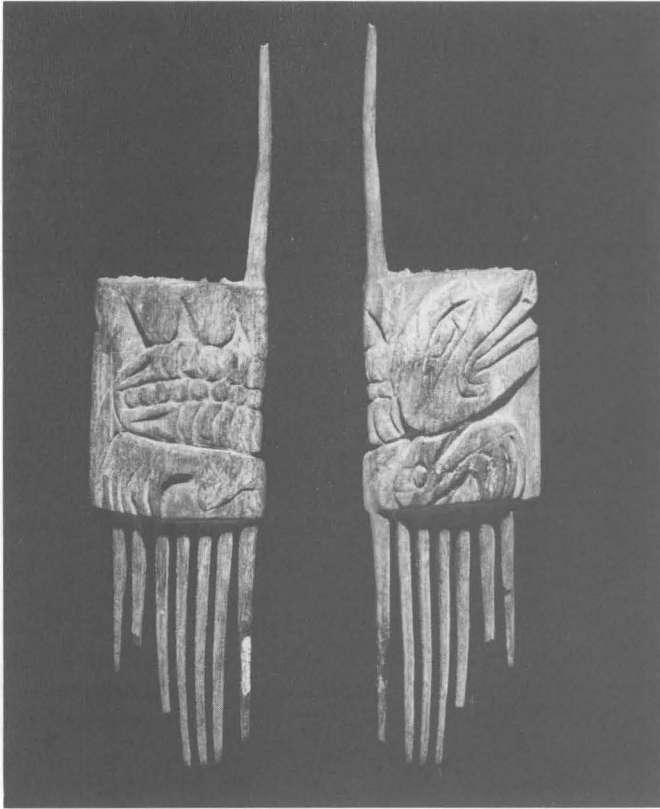


Fig. 10:10. Sea monster carved in wrap-around fashion on comb. Note the use of x-ray technique.

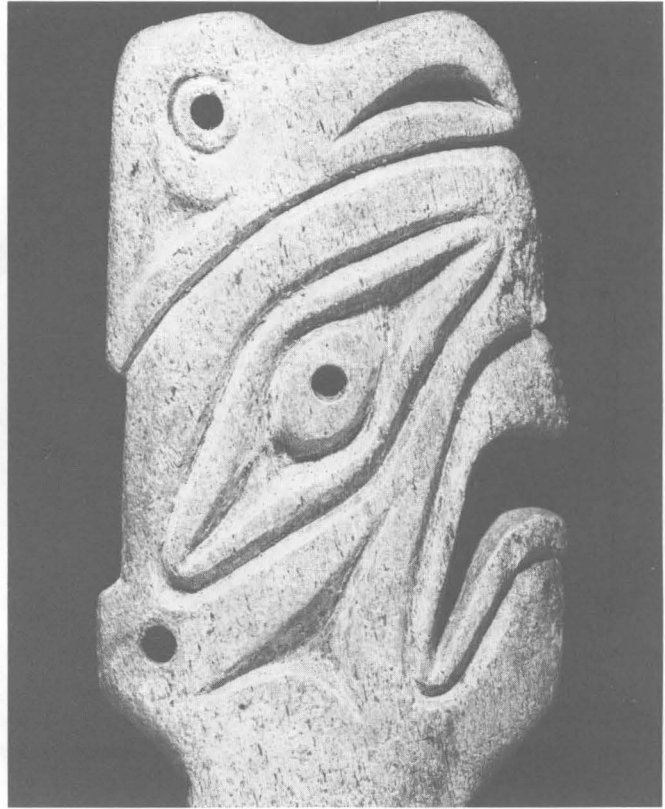


Fig. 10:11. Whalebone club of a type common throughout the northern region.

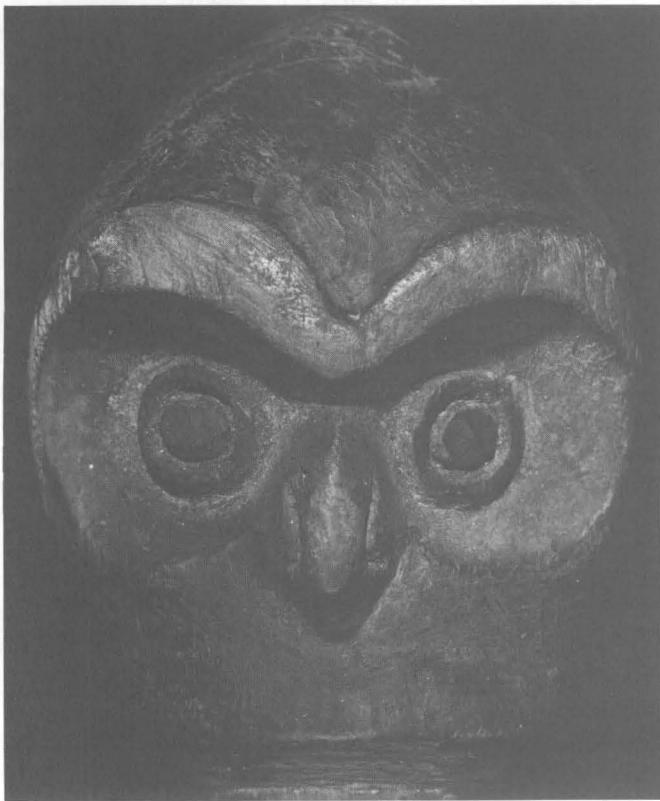


Fig. 10:12. Wooden club head depicting an owl.

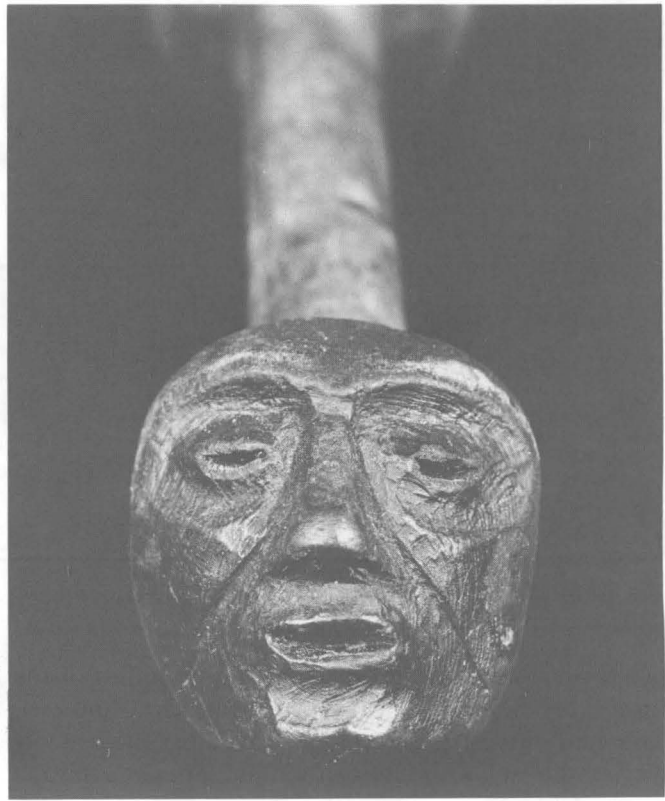


Fig. 10:13. One end of a carved wooden spoon. A similar carved head ornaments the opposite end.

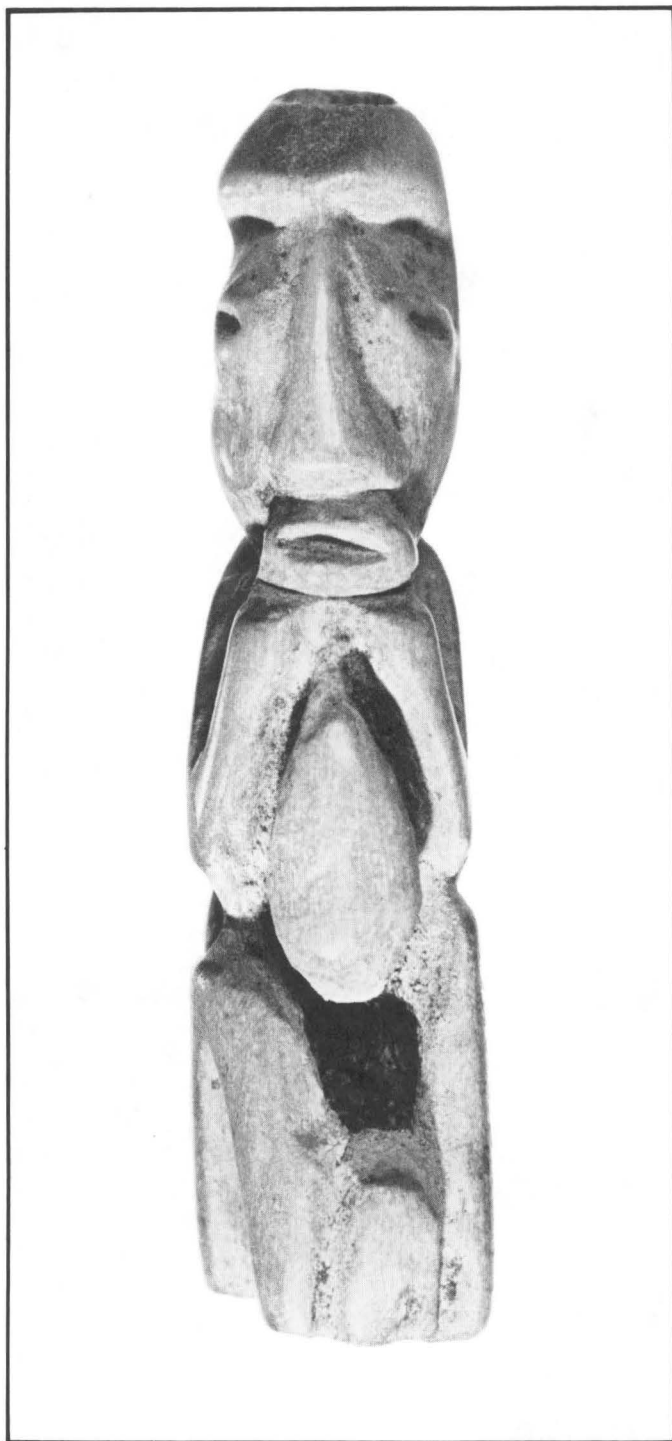


Fig. 10:14. Small bone sculpture of a man in a fetal position.

portraying entire canidae and birds, the bodies of the former are rounded and out of proportion to the rest. This may represent a mythical animal, or may simply display the lack of interest in, or lack of concentration upon, the body as compared with the head. Generally, the most realistically portrayed bodies are those of birds. These are seen in flight on a bone comb carved in-the-

round, in profile incised on a house plank and on harpoon valves and carved in-the-round at rest on a double-ended weaver's sword.

X-ray technique characterizes some pieces of Ozette art, notably a whale incised on a large wall panel, a small bone sculpture of a whale, a bird on a bird comb and a monster carved onto a wooden comb (Fig. 10:10). In each instance, the spinal column and ribs are simplified and stylized, but are present along with the outline of the body.

Geometric designs often augment or supplement the representational and conventionalized art of the collection. This is seen, for instance, in the dots and circles which decorate a powder measure sculptured in the shape of a man's body found in the early historical level (Fig. 10:15). It also is apparent in cross-hatching on the bird body of a bone comb, in a circle incised around the edge of a spindle whorl also decorated with human faces and in a series of triangular shapes on the blade of a weaver's sword. Often, geometric forms are the only decoration on a specimen. Parallel incised lines, the most frequently used geometric motif, are on box sides, bowl rims, spindle whorls and on a mat creaser. Zig-zag lines, crescents and combinations of triangles are less frequent, appearing on weavers' swords, a loom upright, a spindle whorl and a box side. Other geometric designs include concentric circles on one spindle whorl, radiating lines on another spindle whorl and dots on a bone comb. Complex combinations of lines and other geometric elements are on six of the wooden combs in the collection.

Another manifestation of geometric art, in addition to that incised on a flat surface, is the carving of grooves around a shaft. This may be seen on a number of tool handles and on cylindrical shafts of unknown function. In any society art may serve a variety of functions. At Ozette its primary purpose appears to be as decoration. The application of motifs to secular, functional artifacts that may be divided into three categories: those that are always decorated, those that are sometimes decorated and those that are never decorated. For instance, invariably Ozette tool handles, spindle whorls, weavers' swords, combs and seal or fish clubs are decorated: the degree varies, but some motif is present on each of these items. The handles furnish a particularly good example of varying levels of decoration used to augment functional pieces. On some, the major decorative element consists simply of parallel incised lines or geometric shapes carved in-the-round. Others, usually handles for chisels or knives, are carefully executed sculptures of humans. The second category of artifacts—those optionally decorated—includes boxes, bowls, harpoon shafts and valves and loom uprights. The third—those that seem never to be decorated—includes wedges, awls, canoe paddles, canoe bailers, stone tools, bows, arrows and loom rollers.

Most frequently, the secular decoration applied to



Fig. 10:15. Three views of small, carved human figure with dot and circle design for ornamentation. This object from the early historic level at Ozette appears to be a powder measure.

functional objects either is realistic or geometric. Animals, humans and geometric designs are carved in-the-round and incised on the appropriate surfaces of tools, bowls and combs. A few exceptions with conventionalized art applied to objects of secular use include a stylized creature on a weaver's sword, a sea monster on a comb, various motifs on box sides and stylized eye motifs possibly representing a human face on a spindle whorl.

Strictly ceremonial art is very difficult to isolate in the Ozette collection with the exception of carved whale fin inlaid with sea otter teeth (*Fig. 10:1*). This piece represents the dorsal fin and the section of the back of the whale directly under it, said to have been given to the head whaler. As an art piece, the sculpture must have figured in a ritual of some sort.

Another excellent example of ceremonial art is a thunderbird on the side of a large box (*Fig. 10:5*). This is identified as a thunderbird mainly on the basis of the tufts of feathers on the head and the feathers on the body. The face is carved carefully and is well finished with eyes and mouth stylized, and the whole inlaid with teeth of pile perch and sea otter. From these indications, it appears that the box may have had ceremonial functions, perhaps used for the storage of ritual paraphernalia. Or, it may have been one side of a box drum. A third example of ceremonial art is a club carved with owl faces on each end (*Fig. 10:12*). This piece shows no evidence

of the bashing seen on utilitarian seal clubs; furthermore, it is finely and carefully smoothed and finished. The owl faces are a combination of realistic and conventionalized elements. The whalebone clubs in the collection (*Fig. 10:11*) all display the conventionalized representation of a mythical theme and, unlike the wooden seal clubs, probably had primarily ceremonial functions.

The unusually complete inventory of art work present at Ozette indicates a correlation between realistic representational art and secular functions on the one hand, and conventionalized art and ceremonial use on the other. The correlation is not perfect, however, for stylized themes also appear on objects of apparently secular function. Quite possibly items that seem intended for secular use may have performed a ceremonial function as well.

Excavations so far have not produced certain items of ceremonial use such as masks and drum frames. These may some day be found. Ozette offers an unparalleled opportunity for understanding the nature and role of art on the Northwest Coast at a time before the influences of Euro-American culture began to manifest itself and change both the art and the way of life of the people who produced it.

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