

# Change and Continuity in Northwest Coast Art

ROY L. CARLSON

Where, when and why did Northwest Coast art originate, and what changes have taken place in it over the centuries? Instead of using this concluding chapter to summarize the preceding contributions, it seems more informative to attempt to answer this question by reviewing the information provided in the earlier chapters, and where possible adding to it. Form, meaning and style are all concepts which assist in responding to this query, and of these "meaning" is the most useful starting point. All art, or at least the kind of art found archaeologically, has form, and some has meaning. Form is obvious in that it can be seen and felt, and while it may be perceived differently by different people, it is nevertheless there visually and tactilely. Meaning, on the other hand, is more ephemeral and is relative to context. The "meaning" of an object to an art historian in the context of development of a particular art tradition is quite different from the "meaning" of such a piece in the context of the particular culture which produced it. There are also universal "meanings" such as the sexual meanings, the hidden agenda, as pointed out in Duff's analysis of Northwest Coast art. However, it is neither the art historical meanings, nor the universals, but the particular culturally specific meaning that I refer to here, and call symbolic meaning.

Symbolic meaning is actually a form of communication in which a form tells the viewer something more than that it is long and narrow or short and oval, something more specific than a universal reaction, something which relates to a system or sub-system of the culture from which stemmed this thing *we* classify as art. While it is possible to observe form, it is necessary to elicit symbolic meaning, and ask, "What does this mean?"

Discovery of symbolic meaning poses a problem for archaeologists studying the works of long dead peoples whose creations cannot be observed in use and who can't

be asked about symbolic meaning. (Ethnologists have some of the same problems, but for different reasons.) There are some so-called psychic archaeologists who claim to be able to feel an object and find out what it was all about, or sit with it in a dark room until some "meaning" pops into their head. Such activities are best described as quackery except to the extent that meanings obtained in this manner are potentially universal meanings. Ethnographic analogy rather than psychic power is the normal method for drawing inferences concerning symbolic meaning, and even there some problems and limitations are present.

Art objects from nonliterate societies usually convey meaning, and are symbols which relate to the belief system. Ethnographic analogy is simply the method whereby prehistoric objects of the same or similar forms to those known ethnographically are assumed to have the same or similar meanings. It is one of the reasons why three of the chapters in this book (those by Holm, Duff and Suttles) describe the known ethnographic art in order to provide a basis for interpreting the unknown, the art found archaeologically. It is necessary to understand contexts and meaning of ethnographic art as a basis for analogy in interpreting prehistoric art. These chapters also point up one of the problems with ethnographic analogy which is understanding the complexities and potential multiple symbolism of the ethnographic art which in many cases such as Central Coast Salish (Suttles, Ch. 4) are poorly known and only partially understood. For this reason interpretations placed on archaeological artifacts are more likely to be valid on a general level, than on a highly specific one. In order to look for origins of Northwest Coast art it is necessary to look at those systems of belief in which art had meaning, and their origins.

Most Northwest Coast art objects were symbols of

power. This power was based on a spiritual encounter either by the current owner of the symbol or his ancestor. Spirits were potentially present in all natural phenomena including plants and animals, and it is the latter which were most commonly represented in art. Localized practices involving this basic belief in spirits were found in all coastal regions. Guardian spirits, shamanic spirits, secret society spirits and crest spirits constitute categories in which most spirits can be conceptualized and related to variations in belief and practice among different groups, even though these categories are not mutually exclusive, would probably not have been recognized by the bearers of ethnographic Northwest Coast culture, and do not include all Northwest Coast religious phenomena. We learn from ethnography that art communicated in these four areas, and that they were the stimuli to artistic production. The most economical hypothesis is that such was also the case in prehistoric times.

Collectors of museum specimens and ethnographers frequently did not bridge the gap between the art objects they collected and the belief systems behind them, and it has remained for later users of their data to try to put the two together. The fragments of ethnographic information collected over the years should be considered as just what they are, bits and pieces, and their interpretative value should be extended beyond the immediate specimen to other ethnographic objects of the same type. If the style of a prehistoric object is the same as that of the ethnographic analog, the case for continuity is considerably strengthened.

Style is that somewhat ephemeral quality of objects which is most easily recognized the more foreign it is. It refers to those recurrent combinations of attributes of form and content which cluster spatially and temporally. Hypothetically there are an infinite number of ways of depicting human and animal forms. Both guiding and restricting such depictions are the natural forms of the beings portrayed, the materials and tools used and the art tradition itself which defines the current or proper mode. The latter should be able to transcend both scale differences and differences in media, and thus along with content constitute the patterned forms in which the same elements are repeated from object to object and material to material and are basic to definitions of style.

Style is a function of art as a communicative device in nonliterate cultures. In order to serve as communication art must be culturally specific, and be maintained without radical alterations. In order to function as a way to communicate meaning, style must of necessity change only slowly and thus perpetuate meaning. There are really only two major styles on the Northwest Coast, a southern and a northern. Both illustrate spirits or ancestors manifested in human or animal form. The similarities between them are related in part to common materials and techniques and in part to the belief systems shared throughout the coast. The differences are less in actual content than

in the forms of the motifs and their spatial inter-relationships on the field of design. Kwakiutl and Bella Coola areas partake of both styles. Borden's hypothesis (Ch. 8) that changes in the art tradition on the lower Fraser in the early historic period were the result of influences from the north would fit better with stylistic data if the direction, north, were changed to west. My impression is that what he calls "northern" is primarily Nootkan.

In the southern style the motifs are usually separate and do not interact or interlock in a meaningful manner. More than two creatures on a field of design are unusual, and ovoids and formlines are atypical. Both two-dimensional applied forms and sculptural forms are common as is asymmetry; eyebrows are frequently joined and there is considerable naturalism. Humanoids, the thunderbird, owls, wolf, snakes and small carnivores are commonly depicted. This style with some regional variations is typical of the Lower Columbia, Washington Coast, Straits of Juan de Fuca and Georgia, west coast of Vancouver Island, the lower Fraser and lower Thompson.

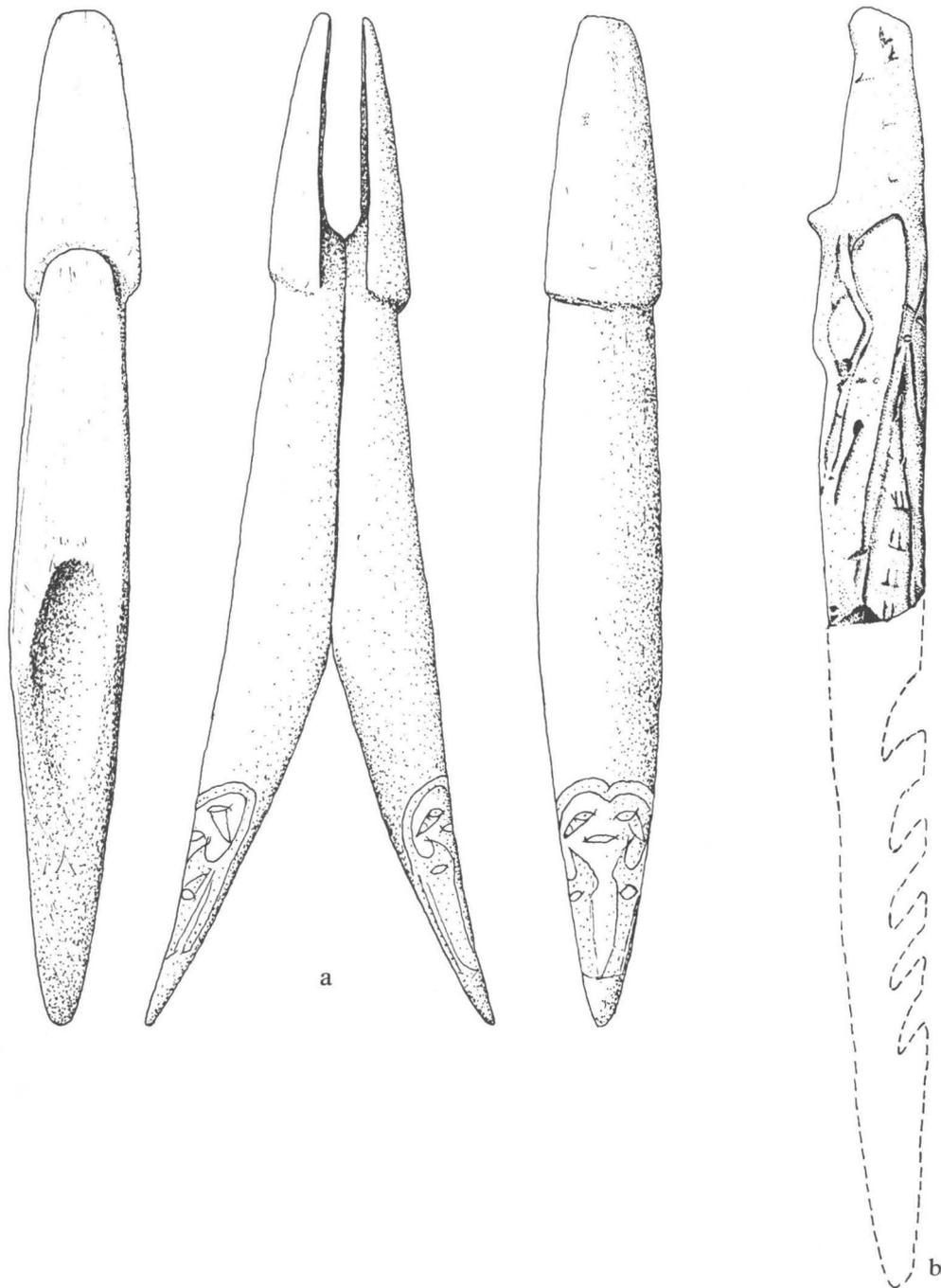
The northern style is characterized by a balanced symmetry and intricate interlocking of human and animal motifs modified to fit within natural spaces. Eagle, raven, bear, beaver, killerwhale, owl and humanoids are emphasized but many additional animals are shown. This style is typical of Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian. Holm (Ch. 2) provides more detail on styles.

### Guardian Spirits

Guardian spirits assisted their possessors in everyday tasks—canoe building, hunting, fishing or spinning and weaving. Such spirits were obtained through a dream or a vision either as a result of a specific quest or accidentally. Swan (1870:62) who studied the Makah in the early 1860's described the attitude concerning visions. . .

what he sees he makes known to no one...  
whether in form of bird, beast or fish though  
the animal representing this guardian spirit  
is sometimes indicated by carvings or paintings  
made by the Indian.

Much the same situation prevailed among the adjacent Coast Salish peoples although information on spirit representations is not available for many groups. If this system were consistent throughout, then a bio-morphic design on a tool or other utilitarian object should represent the spirit power of the person owning and using the tool in question. Some ethnographic analogs and prehistoric examples are shown in Figure 11:1. The lightning snake, a powerful spirit for success in whaling, is depicted on the ethnographic harpoon valves. By analogy the prehistoric example shown by a wolf incised on the end of a point for a leister or fish spear should represent the guardian spirit of the owner of that implement. We do



*Fig. 11:1.* Motifs on tools which may represent guardian spirits. *a* Valves from a whaling harpoon head depicting the lightning serpent, a powerful spirit for success in whaling. Southern Nootka, 19th century. *b* Butt end of a prehistoric leister or fish spear showing a wolf; Marpole phase, Cattle Point site, ca. 400 B.C.-A.D. 400.

learn that the wolf was a powerful spirit for success in hunting and fishing (Haeberlin and Gunther 1930:74). Another example shows a small bear carved on the end of an adze, a woodworking tool. One would assume that the bear was a guardian spirit who gave power for skill in woodworking. The earliest example of a tool bearing a potential spirit motif is the haft for a carving knife dating between 3500 and 4000 years ago (Matson 1976:182) which shows a bearded humanoid with his hands on his chest (*Fig. 8:6*). This representation is not recognizable by

ethnographic analogy, but the attributes of style—joined eyebrows and hands on the chest—place it clearly in the southern Northwest Coast art tradition

The Ozette material (Ch. 10), while barely prehistoric at best, shows a direct continuity into ethnographic Makah where Swan (1870:62) notes that the Thunderbird (*Figs. 10:5, 10:11*) took precedence over all other mythological beings, and that owls, bears and wolves were the most commonly represented guardian spirits. Owls in much the same style as those of Ozette occur as far south



Fig. 11:2. Fragment of a siltstone object, possibly a spindle whorl, incised on both sides with a representation stylistically similar to the Thunderbird. Garrison site, San Juan Islands, ca. A.D. 100.

as the Willamette Valley, Oregon (Murdey and Wentz 1975 Fig. 6u). On the southern Northwest Coast during the eighteenth century, the period to which most ethnographic information refers and from which most ethnographic art originated, it seems that Thunder was both a very widespread and powerful spirit, and that the Thunderbird is one of the most common motifs in art work. This fact is not generally understood. The centre of elaboration, as far as actual knowledge goes, was among the Makah largely because of Swan's study in the 1860's; unfortunately there were no comparable studies of Salish and other Nootkan groups at that time. The Makah possess the origin myth of the Thunderbird, and this spirit was fully integrated with concepts of whaling, wealth and war which explains his powerful nature. This power extended to Salish groups even though certain facets of the Nootkan complex such as whaling did not. The head on most whalebone clubs of this period is the Thunderbird which indicates power for war. One suspects that these ceremonial clubs all originated with a single Nootkan group such as the Makah, and that their widespread distribution came about through potlatching in connection with secret society dancing. The appearance of the Thunderbird on spindle whorls of the Central Coast Salish (Suttles, Ch. 4) could be related to spirit power necessary for spinning wool which was widely used on ceremonial regalia, and may mean that an inherited, possibly generalized power is represented. Barnett (1939: 271) reported Thunder as the strongest of all powers

among many Central Coast Salish groups, and Haeberlin and Gunther (1930:75) state it was a powerful spirit among Puget Sound Salish. The earliest representation in the same style as the Thunderbird is on a fragment of a siltstone object (Fig. 11.2) possibly a spindle whorl, from the Garrison site in the San Juan Islands. The earliest whalebone clubs (see Ch. 6) do not show the Thunderbird, but humanoids. The relationship between the Thunder spirit and Thunderbird is poorly known.

### Shamanism

Shamanic spirits were those that enabled their possessors to undertake curing of the sick. Ritualists also undertook curing and ritual cleansing, but their power came by inheritance (Barnett 1939:273) rather than from encounters with spirits. Many of the same animals spirits were used for shamanism as well as everyday activities (Haeberlin and Gunther 1930), although reptilian forms—snakes and lizards—seem to be more often (if not exclusively) associated with shamanism. From the archaeological perspective, such representations on non-utilitarian paraphernalia are more likely to be shamanic spirits than other kinds of guardian spirits. Pendants, soul catchers, rattles and other objects bespeak more of shamanism than of other systems.

Ethnographic pendants of bone or stone are normally interpreted as shamanic charms depicting the shaman's spirit helpers. The ethnographic land otter pendants of the Tlingit (Jonaitis 1978) are the best known examples. The earliest prehistoric pendants are perforated or ringed animal teeth which may well have represented spirit power of their human owners, whether shamanic or guardian spirit. By 4500 B.P. fish pendants (Ch. 7) were known, and by 3500 B.P. MacDonald (Ch. 6) reports pendants conceptualized as "stylized figures hung upside down" from Prince Rupert Harbour sites.

A miniature skull (Fig. 8:12a) of the Locarno Beach phase about 2500 years ago has ethnographic counterparts in Hamatsa paraphernalia. The Hamatsa or Cannibal Dance is a Kwakiutl secret society which incorporated many elements of shamanism. Ribbed figures are also usually identified as having shamanic affiliations of which the earliest is the famous wolf (or land otter?) comb (Fig. 2:1) from the Prince Rupert Harbour sequence about A.D. 800. Animals depicted with ribs may actually symbolize transformed shamen.

The protruding tongue is probably the most significant shamanic element in Northwest Coast art, although very little specific information is known about it. Krause (1956:195) cites Veniaminof's report of 1840 in which he notes that the novice seeking spirit power is "lucky if he gets a land otter in whose tongue is contained the whole secret of shamanism." De Laguna (1954:175-176) notes that the novice shaman collects the tongues of those creatures that fall dead at his feet during the vision



*Fig. 11:3.* Fragment of tubular soapstone pipe showing the protruding tongue. Pipes of this general type date between A.D. 400-1200, although the date of this particular pipe is unknown. From a water line excavation at Yale, B.C.

quest, and these become the source of his power. The numerous examples of ethnographic rattles which show the protruding tongue joining a human and an animal probably symbolically represent the transfer of spirit power, and the sexual connotations seen by Duff (Ch. 3) may not be there at all. Prehistoric examples of the protruding tongue are rare (*Fig. 11:3*).

There are a number of figurines made of elk antler in the form of a human figure with perforated projections on the side of the head, a skirt, extended legs and arms either flat on the chest or at the sides (*Fig. 11:4*). These figurines appear to date between A.D. 200 and A.D. 1200, and are found in interior Washington (Smith 1904, Strong 1959, *Fig. 40*), on Northern Puget Sound (Carlson 1954, Onat and Munsell 1970), and on the central coast of British Columbia (Ch. 7). Their size and the perforations indicate they were worn as pendants, probably on the chest. Only one has been found with a burial. The closest

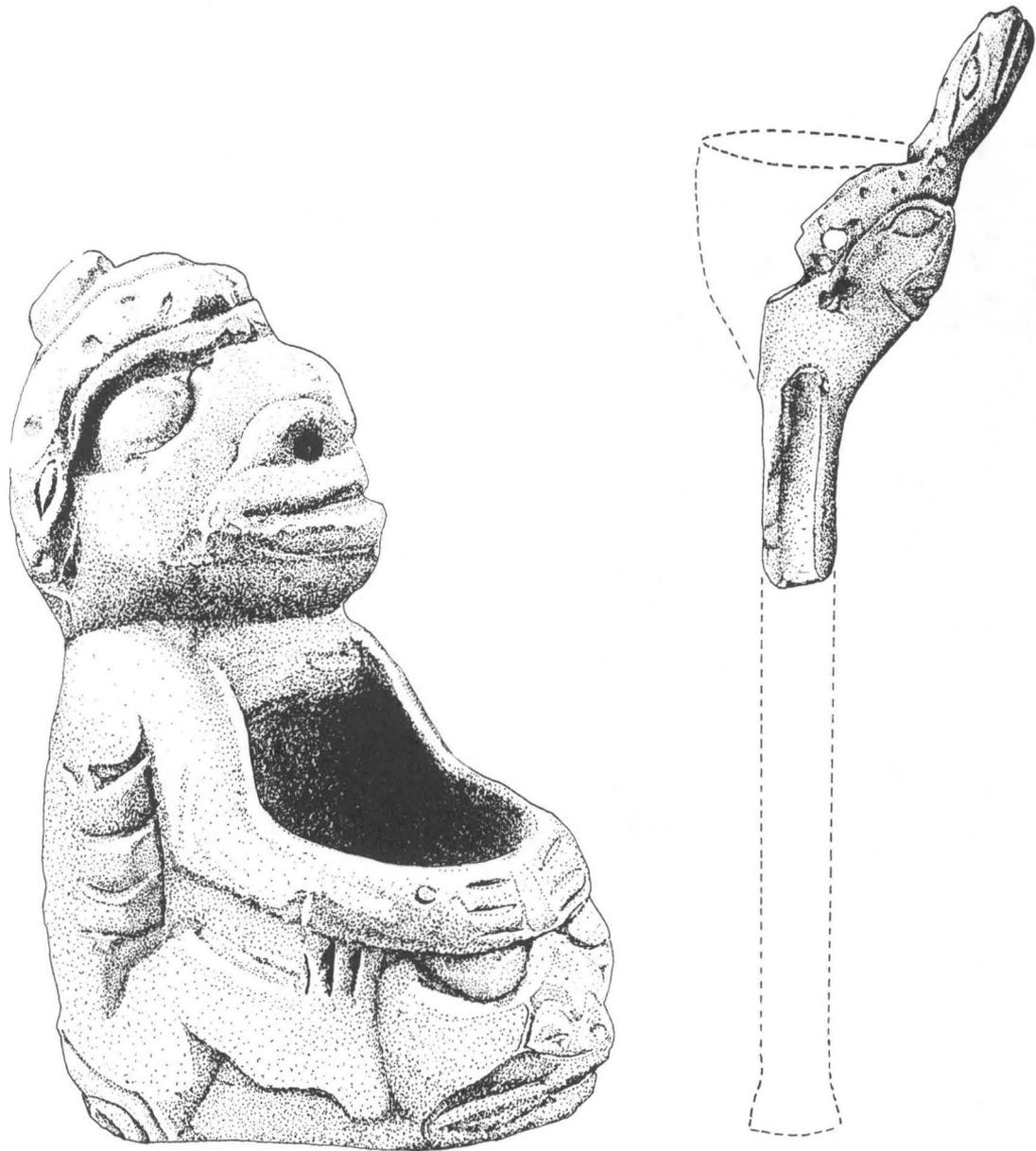


*Fig. 11:4.* Antler figurine from Sucia Island. Such figurines were probably worn suspended on the chest, and suggest shamanic practices.

analogies are with Siberian shaman's pendants (see Okalnikov 1979:203), although the actual styles are not identical. This type is unknown from the historic period.

Another complex of prehistoric artifacts also strongly suggests shamanism. Prehistoric stone figures (*Fig. 11:5*) with bowls in their laps centre archaeologically along the Fraser and Thompson rivers and the adjacent coast. These bowls are not securely dated, but seem to belong in the period between 1 A.D. and A.D. 1000. They occur at Marpole (Ch. 8) about 1 A.D. and up river (Ch. 9) by A.D. 800. Duff (Ch. 3) attempts to relate these to girls' puberty ceremonies. The problem is that these bowls do not conform to Boas' (1890:90) descriptions of the bowls used in such rites. I suspect that they are actually tobacco mortars used in conjunction with pipes in the same style, and that both were employed in shamanic curing rituals involving smoking. Such practices are not known from the ethnographic period on the Northwest Coast, but are known from California, the direction from which the custom of smoking likely diffused. There is one example of a figure of the same style which is actually a pipe (*Fig. 8:29a*).

Whatever speculations one wishes to make regarding their specific use, it can be said with high probability that these bowls relate to shamanic practices. The depictions



*Fig. 11:5.* Soapstone bowl and tubular pipe suggesting use in shamanic curing ceremonies. The bowl or tobacco mortar is from a pit house village near Lytton, N.B., and the pipe fragment from the beach near Sidney, B.C. Both pieces probably date 400-1200 A.D.

of ribbed humans in conjunction with rattlesnakes, toads and frogs and other reptilian forms is strongly indicative of shamanism and curing. The human depicted is probably the shaman himself, and other creatures his spirit helpers. Snakes are frequently found depicted on these bowls. Among the Puget Sound Salish a shaman demonstrated his power by making a stone or belt or other object turn into a snake which moved, and powerful shamans had a snake or lizard which they shot into people (Haeberlin and Gunther 1930:78-79). The "O" mouth form which appears on several of these bowls has been likened to that of Tsonoqua, the cannibal woman of the Kwakiutl. Similarities in form are indeed there, but in total configuration the prehistoric pieces suggest shamanic curing practices in which case the mouth form

could represent the blowing of smoke rather than the "Hu! Hu!" of the cannibal woman.

### Secret Societies

Drucker (1940:227) described the secret societies of initiation of the Kwakiutl as "a dramatic re-enactment of the legendary encounter of the novices ancestor with a spirit and a display of the gifts (names, songs masks, carvings and other 'privileges') bestowed by the supernatural benefactor." He also noted the similarities between the secret societies and shamanic practices, and suggests that the former were derived from shamanism. Masks, puppets and other items of stagecraft were employed in these performances. The *sxwayxwey* among

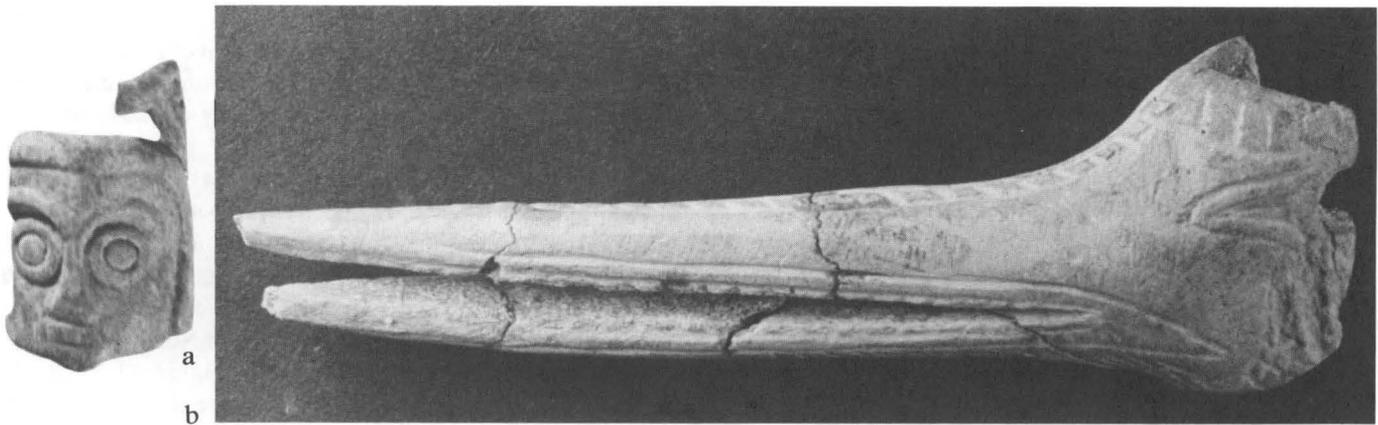


Fig. 11:6. Miniature prehistoric masks made of antler. *a* found on the beach on Mayne Island; style suggests late Marpole phase, 800-1200 A.D.; *b* from excavations at Crescent Beach, 500-1000 B.C.

the Salish (Suttles, Ch. 4) and the Duckwally of the Makah are similar performances which also employ masks and rattles. No prehistoric rattles have been found, and no masks except for several small effigies (Figs. 11:6, 8:9) all from the Coast Salish region. The earliest is a miniature long beaked mask of antler dating to about 2500 years ago which resembles historic masks. The other (Fig. 8:9) is of stone, dates to about A.D. 1, and has a nasal cavity like the *sxwayxwey* ghost mask. A third (Fig. 11:6), also of antler, is undated but stylistically suggests late Marpole phase (ca. A.D. 800) and a link to the *sxwayxwey* complex of ethnographic times. The small skull (Fig. 8:12a) dating to about 500 B.C. analogous to Hamatsa paraphernalia has already been mentioned.

### Crests

Crests are graphic portrayals of power or privileges which were inherited from ancestors who “earned” them, rather than their being “earned” through spirit encounters by their immediate possessors. Crests and ancestors are what one sees on the “totem” poles of the northern groups (Tlingit, Haida, Tsimshian) on the feast dishes, house posts and some masks used by them and the Kwakiutl and on some Coast Salish house posts and possibly ritual paraphernalia. Crests are emblems of status and prestige and emphasize family or lineage connections. Wolf, raven, bear, eagle, beaver, frog, killer whale and other animal representations served as crests. The emphasis in studies of Northwest Coast art has long been on the crest system and its relationship to social rank. This emphasis has tended to obscure the basic concept of spirit power which is fundamental to the crest system as well as to guardian spirits and shamanism. Crests have cosmological or spiritual contexts as well as those of social rank, and it seems likely that the system of inheritance of crests developed from an earlier system of seeking spirit power. The problem the archaeologist faces is how to tell from

an art object whether the figure depicted was earned or inherited particularly since there was probably a developmental progression from the former to the latter.

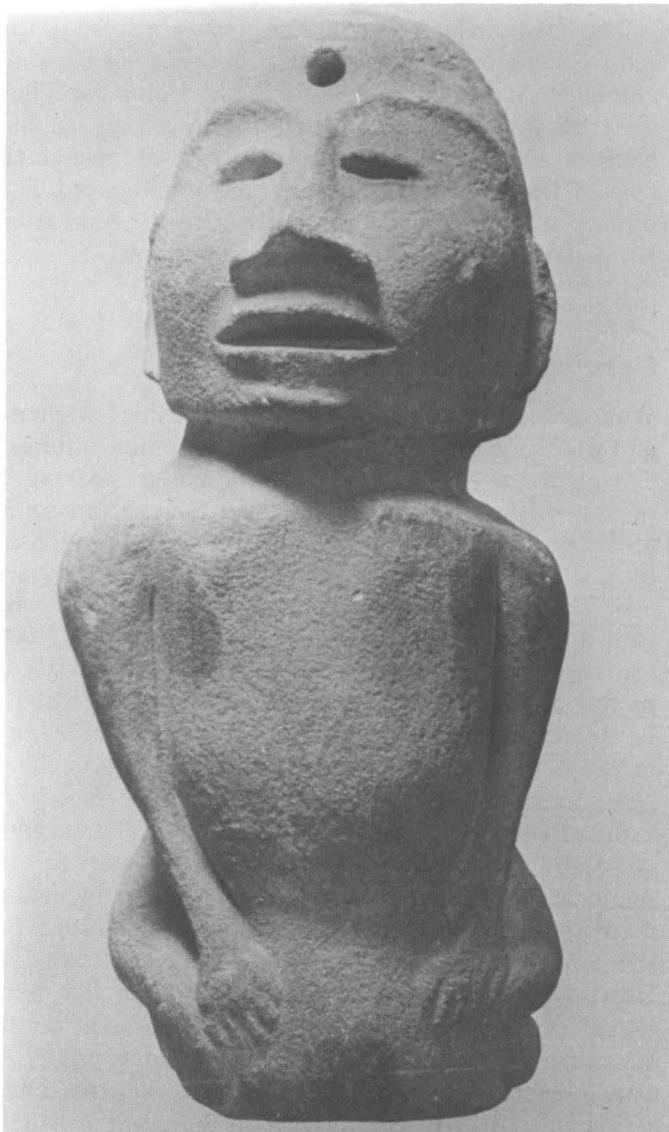
The most obvious examples of crests are some of the red paint pictographs placed in prominent positions on cliff faces on the central coast of British Columbia. They are analogous to the totem poles of other regions, and likely proclaimed the inherited privileges of local chieftains. These pictographs are probably not very old. Figures on stone bowls such as the frog on the bowl from Kwatna (Fig. 7:8) could also be crest symbols.

### Conclusions

Where, when and why did Northwest Coast art originate and what changes have taken place over the centuries? The empirical evidence indicates the initial appearance of simple life forms in the archaeological record some 4500 years ago followed by considerable elaboration of the tradition in the period between 2000 and 2500 years ago. The earliest piece in the southern style is the haft from the Glenrose site dating between 3500 and 4000 years ago. The archaeological data do not provide a clear picture of the development of the northern style with its form lines and interlocked parts. The spoon handle (Fig. 8:10c) dated 2500 years ago is certainly approaching Northern style, and a zoomorphic concretion (Fig. 2:22) with rudimentary joint marks dates about 2000 years ago. An early T-form, one of Holm’s (Ch. 2) “holes in the donut”, is on a pendant (Fig. 11:7) from a burial at the Garrison site in the San Juan Islands (Carlson 1960). The site is Marpole phase and has radiocarbon dates of 150 B.C. for the lowest strata and A.D. 370 for the most recent one. The pendant comes from the middle strata so a date of about A.D. 100 would be appropriate. A bone object (Fig. 6:15c) with classic eye elements dates to about A.D. 1100 and suggests northern style was full blown by then. The best prehistoric example of northern



Fig. 11:7. Antler pendants made from brow bands. Marpole phase, Garrison site. ca. A.D. 100.



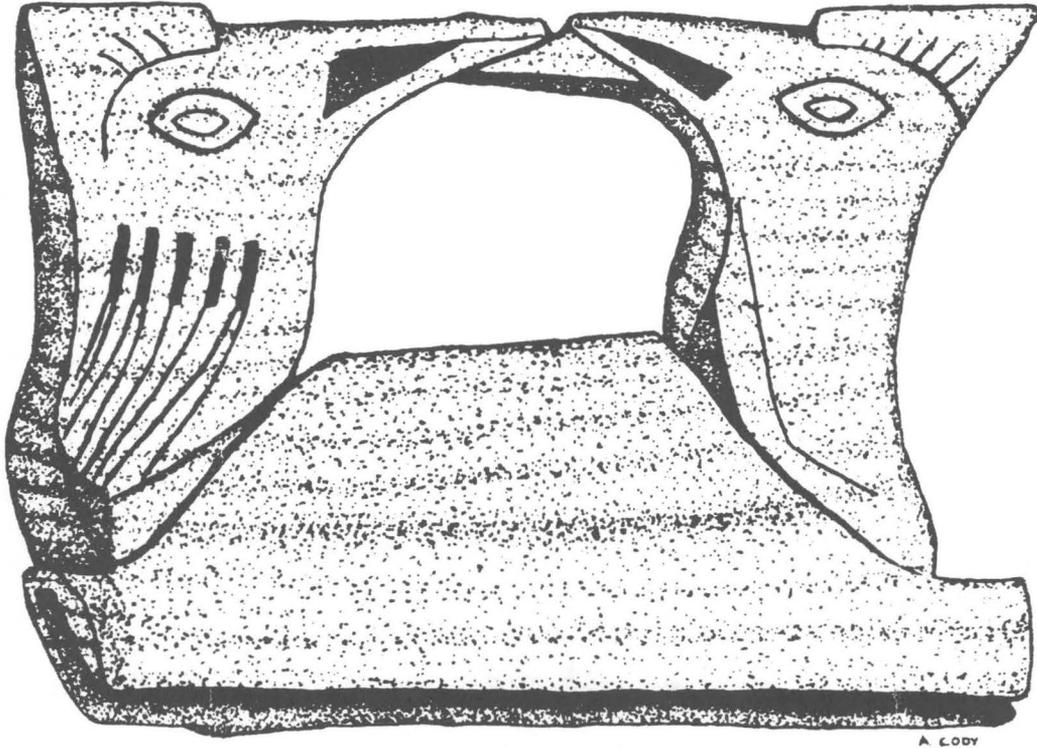
style (Fig. 6:13c) is not satisfactorily dated. All in all, current archaeological information suggests that classic northern style resulted in part from the interaction created by the influence of southern art on an originally simple rendering of life forms on the Northern Coast.

The Ozette material points up what has been lost through decay at other sites, and behooves us to search for earlier waterlogged deposits where perishables have been better preserved. A more complete archaeological record might also help place idiosyncratic forms which presently constitute some of the discontinuities in the Northwest Coast art traditions. Such forms as that in Figure 11:8, which presently stand alone in style and content, could be the result of experimental or innovative behavior or could be related to styles yet to be discovered.

The preceding paragraphs describe some of the continuities in the archaeological record in terms of fitting various artifacts into the ethnographic belief systems by analogy, and at the same time projecting those belief systems into the past. This method worked best on the general level for inferring a 4000 year belief in spirits, reasonably well for guardian and shamanic spirits, and less well for secret societies and crests because of the difficulty in differentiating symbols associated with these practices from the more general ones.

Why specific art traditions originate is always conjectural, although evidence from nonliterate cultures the world over is that such art usually relates to the belief system which in turn arose as part of man's attempts to explain and control his world. A basic belief in spirit power and control through shamanistic practices were probably part of the belief system of the earliest inhabitants of the Northwest Coast. As populations and food surpluses grew and life became patterned around intensive food gathering in spring, summer and fall, the winter became free for shamanic performances, dances and potlaches which integrated belief with art and fostered the development of the art tradition. The masterpieces of historic times came from simple beginnings. Only further archaeological research will provide more definite glimpses of the intervening steps.

Fig. 11:8. Stone figure from "between Vancouver Island and the Mainland." This figure is idiosyncratic and does not closely conform to any known Northwest Coast style.



*Fig. 11:9.* The oldest wood carving known from the Northwest Coast. Mat creaser made of cedar recovered in July, 1983 in waterlogged deposits at the Hoko River site which date to 2750 C-14 years ago. This artifact indicates nearly three millenia of continuity for the southern Northwest Coast art style. Illustrations and information courtesy of Dale Croes, director of the Hoko River Archaeological project. Length 14 cm.

