



IDEOLOGICAL CONTENT OF PREHISTORIC NORTHWEST COAST ART

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ABSTRACT

The art tradition of the Northwest Coast of North America has long been of interest to scholars undertaking research in art history. The historic period art consists of painted and sculptural biomorphic images and the medium is mostly wood whereas the prehistoric objects are mostly carvings in bone, antler, and stone including rock art. With some notable exceptions the tendency among scholars has been to emphasize the relationship between the art and socio-political institutions such as kinship and secular power structures even though the underlying ideology and many of motifs are clearly religious in nature. We now know from recent archaeological discoveries that the Northwest Coast art tradition goes back in time at least 4,000 years and that even at this early date employed many of the same motifs still in use today. These long enduring motifs are best understood as ideograms communicating significant components of the belief system particularly spirit power, transformation, and regeneration. Most motifs relate directly or indirectly to the belief in spirit power that was the guiding ideology throughout the Northwest Coast and was integrated into all aspects of everyday life. Spirits were more helpers than protectors and were usually either animals or supernatural beings that empowered both lay individuals and shamans.

RESUME

La tradition artistique de la côte nord-ouest du nord de l'Amérique a été d'un grand intérêt pour les savants entreprenants des recherches en histoire de l'art. La période artistique historique se compose d'images biomorphiques sculpturales, le matériau étant principalement le bois alors que les objets préhistoriques sont essentiellement sculptés en os, en bois de cerfs et pierre dont l'art rupestre. Avec quelques exceptions notables, la tendance parmi les savants a été de souligner comme une parenté les relations entre l'art et les institutions sociopolitiques, et des structures de pouvoir profane même si l'idéologie sous-jacente et beaucoup de motifs sont religieux dans la nature. Nous savons maintenant depuis de récentes découvertes archéologiques que la tradition artistique de la côte nord-ouest remonte à au moins 4000 ans, et que beaucoup de motifs utilisés il y a pourtant si longtemps sont identiques à ceux utilisés encore aujourd'hui. Ces motifs perdurant longtemps sont mieux compris en tant qu'ideogrammes communiquant des éléments significatifs du système de croyance, particulièrement le pouvoir de l'esprit, la transformation et la régénération. La plupart des motifs se rapportent directement ou indirectement à la croyance en un pouvoir spirituel qu'était l'idéologie directrice à travers la côte nord-ouest et était intégré dans tous les aspects de la vie quotidienne. Les esprits étaient plus des aides que des protecteurs, et n'étaient habituellement ni des animaux ni des êtres surnaturels conférant un pouvoir à la fois aux profanes et aux chamanes.

RIASSUNTO

La tradizione artistica della costa nord-occidentale del Nord America suscita da molto tempo l'interesse degli studiosi che intraprendono ricerche di storia dell'arte. L'arte di epoca storica consiste in immagini biomorfiche dipinte e scolpite e il supporto è principalmente legno, mentre gli oggetti preistorici sono per lo più incisi su ossa, corna e pietra, inclusa l'arte rupestre. Con alcune notevoli eccezioni, la tendenza tra gli studiosi è stata di enfatizzare la relazione tra arte ed istituzioni socio-politiche come la parentela e le strutture del potere secolare anche se l'ideologia di fondo e molti dei motivi sono chiaramente di natura religiosa. Oggi noi sappiamo grazie a scoperte archeologiche che la tradizione artistica della costa nord-occidentale risale almeno a 4000 anni fa e che, anche in tale epoca così antica, utilizzava molti degli stessi motivi ancora oggi in uso. Questi motivi di lunga durata sono compresi meglio come ideogrammi che comunicano componenti significative del sistema di credenze, in particolare il potere, la trasformazione e la rigenerazione dello spirito. Gran parte dei motivi fa riferimento direttamente o indirettamente alla credenza nel potere dello spirito che rappresentava l'ideologia guida nella costa nord-occidentale e che era parte integrante di ogni aspetto della vita quotidiana. Gli spiriti erano più degli aiutanti che dei protettori, e di solito erano animali o esseri soprannaturali che conferivano potere sia a individui laici, sia a sciamani.

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INTRODUCTION

Art is not a concept indigenous to the native peoples of the NWC who conceptualized those objects we classify as art as part of everyday living including the ceremonies accompanying changes in status of the living and the dead. The ethnographic art first became known to scholars from the collections made by the late 18th century European explorers, but did not become really well known until the early 20th century with the publication of books such as *Primitive Art* by Franz Boas in 1927 and the many later monographs that continue to be published to this day. The emphasis in these studies has tended to be either stylistic with the emphasis on form and tribal affiliation or the relationship between the art and social rank found unexpectedly in these hunter-gatherer societies, although deeper meanings have been explored by several scholars such as Duff (1975), Levi-Strauss (1982), and Jonaitus (1986) among others.

The prehistoric background of this art tradition is less well known although a recent book (Ames and Maschner 1999, Ch. 9) provides an excellent summary. Long before radiocarbon or other satisfactory dating techniques, Harlan I. Smith (1923) brought together a descriptive album of Canadian archaeological art including that from the NWC. At the Northwest Coast Studies Conference in 1976 I organized a symposium (Carlson 1983a) bringing together papers by different scholars on all art objects known from prehistoric Northwest Coast contexts, and included relevant papers on form and meaning of the ethnographic art, and at the Valcamonica Symposium in 1979 I presented a paper on prehistoric Northwest Coast art and religion and promoted the thesis that Northwest Coast art was originally a religious art and only later became incorporated into the complex contests for social status that typify the central and northern Northwest Coast societies during the ethno-historic period (Carlson 1983b). The most complete study of Northwest Coast rock art was published in 1974 (Hill and Hill 1974). Since that time there have been considerable new data unearthed from coastal archaeological sites, and new insights have been obtained through comparisons with the ethnographic belief system. In the present paper I discuss the recently excavated new data on prehistoric Northwest Coast art, and with some of the previously described art interpret the motifs and images represented as ideograms that during their use-life communicated aspects of basic NWC ideology to the viewer.

This presentation is limited to those art motifs for which there is both archaeological evidence far back into antiquity and an ethnographic analog from at least one NWC society. In some cases the art motif is more widespread and the interpretative analog more limited geographically, and in other cases the reverse. Although archaeological remains are a small sampling of the past, ethnographic data are also only a small sample and from a more restricted period of history. Some 80% of native NWC peoples died during the smallpox epidemics of the late 18th and early 19th centuries (Harris 1997) so it is legitimate to generalize from the small ethnographic sample that has survived to a more widespread archaeological one. Certain motifs that are found in both the prehistoric and ethnographic art have tended to puzzle researchers, and meanings (other than as indicators of social rank) have ranged from hypotheses of death cults to account for the images for skeletal parts (Strong 1945) to sexual innuendo (Duff 1983) to the hidden meanings of orifice imagery (Jonaitus 1986). Those motifs that are most informative regarding basic ideology are human and animal images and protruding tongues indicative of the belief in spirit power, skeletal parts indicative of the belief in regeneration, and masks indicating beliefs in transformation. Whereas almost all of the early art with ideological content is from the region inhabited during the ethno-historic period by the Coast Salish, the most relevant interpretative data comes from Tlingit ethnography on the northern NWC (See Jonaitus 1986, Kan 1989, Krause 1956, Laguna 1972).

RECENT DISCOVERIES

Excavations at the Pender Canal site in the Gulf Islands near the city of Vancouver B.C. from 1983 through 1986 yielded a relatively small number of art forms compared to items related directly to subsistence and technology, but their information value in inferring the non-material aspects of culture is truly phenomenal. The site is the remnant of the burial area of what was once a village inhabited for the most part between 6000 and 3000 calibrated C-14 years ago (Carlson and Hobler 1993). Burials of 156 individuals and fragments of many others were excavated. The most significant art objects are carved spoons made of elk antler employed in the ritual feeding of the ancestors that were found directly associated with five adult female burials, and fragments of an additional four spoons that probably came from disturbed burials. Two additional spoons from the site are in the



collections of the Royal B.C. Museum. The earliest burial with a spoon dates to 2148±320 cal B.C. and the youngest to 1551±250 cal B.C. Three spoons were found at the mouths of the skeletons and one near the face. Bowls consisting of valves of the large horse clam were found with nine additional burials including adult females, adult males, and children. One stone bowl in the shape of a fish was found near one burial. It is probable that spoons made of wood and other food containers of perishable materials accompanied many of the other burials. The following images were carved on the handles of these spoons: humanoids and animals showing skeletal parts including ribs, backbones, and joint marks; masks of humanoids, mountain goat, fish, and sea wolf; birds that are probably owls and eagle and possibly the thunderbird; salamanders with ribs, joint masks and protruding tongues; and one humanoid with a protruding tongue. These images indicate that the fundamentals of NWC religious ideology including practices based on beliefs in spirit power (human, animal, bird effigies, protruding tongues), regeneration (ribs, backbones, joint marks), and transformation (masks) were present by 2,000 B.C., and that practices involving feeding the ancestors and ceremonialism using masks were present. Some of these spoons are illustrated in Carlson (1999:48-57; 2005:39-46). The context of these spoons at or near the mouths of the dead also contains the ideological message of the importance of gifts of food that is the main ingredient of the historic potlatch, of which the memorial potlatch that involved feeding the dead by various means (See Vector-Howe 2007) was the most widespread (Birket-Smith 1967). The motifs carved on these spoons when compared with NWC rock art helped assign approximate dates for the latter (Carlson 1993). These spoons are the earliest large sample of NWC art with ideological content although the messages they convey are present in later prehistoric as well as ethnohistoric examples (See Carlson 1983a).

SPIRIT POWER

Imagine living in a world in which all of nature from rocks and heavenly bodies to plants, animals, and humans was believed to be a spirit capable of good or evil (See Boas 1966). Most Northwest Coast art motifs relate directly or indirectly to the belief in spirit power that was universal throughout the NWC and was integrated into all aspects of society. Most lay people obtained a spirit helper either by fasting and vision seeking during adolescence or by initiation into a secret society (Benedict 1923). Many conjoined human and animal images are best understood as expressions of the dual nature of the individual and his empowering spirit. A shaman obtained multiple spirits and spirits of particular kinds that assisted in curing. Tools and weapons sometimes contain an image of their owner's spirit power, and totem poles and ceremonial paraphernalia frequently depict an ancestral encounter with a supernatural being. How do you tell whether a carved image from an archaeological site represents a spirit? Individuals and their spirit helpers were essentially indivisible and unless both are depicted on an object it is necessary to rely on the presence of certain motifs to make this inference. In Tlingit belief shamanic spirit power resided in the tongues of the animals collected during the vision quest (Krause 1956:197). Protruding tongues are found throughout much of the Northwest Coast both on ritual objects and in rock art and suggest that the belief in the tongue as the locus of spirit power was once widespread on the Coast. The earliest art object with this motif is a fragmentary Pender spoon (Figure 1) with a mask carved with this motif that is C-14 dated to 2000 cal B.C. Three fragmentary spoon handles from the same site show salamanders with prominent tongues. There are other examples in the time period between 2000 B.C. and European contact and many ethnographic examples known to represent supernatural beings.

TRANSFORMATION

Transformation refers to changing form or identity. This concept is rampant throughout NWC mythology and ceremonialism and present throughout the Coast even in regions where its most obvious form – masks – are not known to have been used. Raven transforms himself into whatever necessary to accomplish a particular goal, humans are changed into rocks, and the supernatural beings when they descended from the sky transform into humans (McIlwraith 1948). Images of masks (Figs. 1, 2) are present on four of the Pender spoons. The masks are hollow with an open back or base like those masks still worn by Northwest Coast performers. Two of the most interesting are sea wolf and mountain goat masks carved on the handles of two different spoons (Fig. 2). Another with the protruding tongue (Fig. 1) is similar to the supernatural Bukwus, the wild man of the woods. An image of a long beaked bird from the Crescent Beach site (Carlson 1983b, Fig. 88a) that resembles the HohHoh a secret society bird monster mask that is not part of a spoon dates to this same time period

of about 3,500 B. C., and there other images of bird monster masks from a different site that date only 500 years ago (Carlson 2005). Images of Marpole phase masks dating about 2,000 years ago are found on seated human figure bowls (Carlson 1983b, Fig. 87a), and a slightly younger carving at the handle end of a wooden spear thrower shows what is probably the sea wolf surmounting a human face giving the effect of the transformation masks of the historic period.

REGENERATION

Every year in the late summer and early fall the salmon return from their homes under the sea to the rivers where they were born. To insure this return the bones of the salmon are either returned to the water or sent to the spirit world by burning so that they can be regenerated in succeeding years. The belief in regeneration from bone is not limited to salmon but is acknowledged by the respectful treatment of animal bones and also applies to humans. The presence of skeletal motifs – ribs, backbones, joint marks – on NWC art objects has puzzled many researchers whose speculations about meaning have ranged from ideas about death cults to the supposed x-ray vision of the shaman. The presence of these motifs is actually indicative of the much more fundamental ideology that the life force or as Kan (1989:49-51) phrases it “some essential element of his personhood” of individuals resides in the bones, and is regenerated from the bones, but is inherent in the first salmon ceremony (Gunther 1928) and in shamanic beliefs found throughout the area. It is also a basic belief in Siberian and Eskimo shamanism (Eliade 1965:59-63). Joint marks are circles or ovals found at the joints or sometimes by themselves and could be either a “short-hand” indicator for the bones, or as a metaphor for the importance of connections of family, lineage, or clan.

Skeletal motifs are known earliest from the carvings on the Pender spoons and are found sporadically in younger periods on various parts of the coast and ethnographically are particularly common on Tlingit shamanic paraphernalia. The elongate bowl of the earliest Pender spoon (Fig. 1) is actually the body of the supernatural being whose mask with its protruding tongue is carved on the spoon handle. Oval joint marks are located on the back of the spoon at the shoulders and hips. The arms and legs were carved on the sides of the spoon but because of their fragmentary nature have not been reattached. The external backbone on the rockfish carved at the end of the handle of the sea wolf spoon (Fig. 2) has probably indicates that it is a spirit fish. Many seated human figure bowls show ribs and backbones, and one (Duff 1975, Fig. 52) surely shows the shaman in the state of regeneration with ribs, backbone, arm bones, and collar bones exposed in addition to the fully fleshed arms, legs, body and head.

Images showing skeletal parts occur sporadically throughout the prehistoric period from 2,000 B.C. onward. The main cluster of them in the late prehistoric period are carved anthropomorphic images with ribs and protruding tongues found in cremation burials on the lower Columbia River (Strong 1945).

CONCLUSIONS

These long enduring art motifs – skeletal parts, masks, protruding tongues, and human and animal effigies with these attributes – are best understood as ideograms that communicate basic components of the belief system particularly spirit power, transformation, and regeneration. Their presence on material objects such as the Pender spoons and the archaeological context of these objects are also indicative of underlying ideologies, namely the great importance of gifts of food, and the need to honour or placate the dead ancestors.

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Fig. 1. Ritual spoon from the Pender Canal site dating 2000 B.C. (calibrated). The ovals on the back of the spoon are joint marks The back of the spoon shows joint marks and the open back of the mask. The face on the front of the spoon is the mask of a mythological being with a protruding tongue. R. Carlson photo.

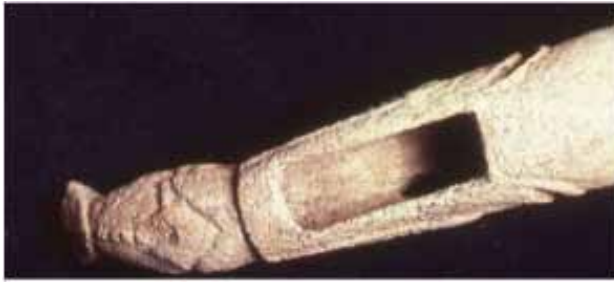


Fig. 2. Images of a sea wolf mask (top and center) and mountain goat mask carved on spoon handles from the Pender Canal site dating 2,000 B.C. (calibrated date). The sea wolf is confronting a rockfish. Both masks are hollow and have an opening in the base for the head of the wearer as in contemporary forehead masks. R. Carlson photo.

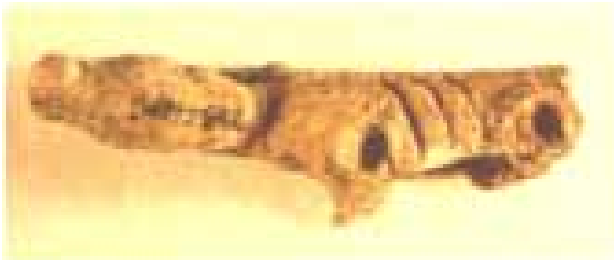


Fig. 3. Images showing bones. Left: handle of a spoon with a salamander image with joint marks and ribs from the Pender Canal site dating ca.1500 B.C. Center: rockfish with external backbone from Pender Canal spoon handle dating ca 2000 B.C. Right: pendant from the Marpole site showing ribbed human dating ca. 1 A.D. R. Carlson photo.