



A PUBLICATION OF THE
THOMAS GILCREASE INSTITUTE
OF AMERICAN HISTORY AND ART

The American Scene

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AMERICAN SCENE

NORTHWEST COAST INHABITANTS

A brief report of the Indians inhabiting the North-western Coastal areas of North America, featuring selected commentary taken from the 18th century accounts of the English explorer, Captain James Cook.

Researched and written especially for the *American Scene* by Donnie D. Good. Line drawings reproduced from original Northwest Coast designs by Joe Chalakee of the Gilcrease Institute staff.



THE PURPOSE OF THIS PIECE IS TO INTRODUCE THE READER TO THE CUSTOMS and habits of the early inhabitants of the North Pacific Coast of the North American continent. The intent is to present some specimens from the extensive anthropological collections at Gilcrease Institute which represent the culture of the Northwest Coast Indians and something of their neighbors to the north, the Eskimos. Coordinating with the artifact materials from the North Pacific coast are quotes from rare volumes in the Gilcrease Library concerning the voyages of Captain James Cook, English sea captain who traveled in that region from 1776 to 1780.

* * *

The region of the Northwest Coast tribes extended as far south as Washington and as far north and west as the Aleutian boundaries. They inhabited the area stretching from Vancouver Island and the state of Washington in the south, to Yakutat Bay in southern Alaska. From southeastern Alaska across the wide Gulf of Alaska, the Alaskan peninsula extends southward to the Aleutian islands: land of the Aleuts. Eskimoland stretches from Bristol Bay along the east shore of the peninsula through Norton Sound, continuing northward to the Arctic Ocean.

During his voyage to Nootka Sound in April, 1778, Captain Cook recorded:

"The land bordering upon the sea-coast is of a middling height and level: but within the Sound, it rises almost everywhere into steep hills, which agree in their general formation, ending in round or blunted tops, with some sharp, though not very prominent, ridges on their sides. Some of these hills may be reckoned high, while others of them are of a very moderate height; but even the highest are entirely covered to their tops with the thickest woods; as well as every flat part toward the sea.

"All the coves are furnished with a great quantity of fallen wood lying in them, which is carried in by the tide; and with rills of fresh water, sufficient for the use of a ship, which seem to be supplied entirely from the rains, and fogs that hover about the tops of the hills. For few springs can be expected in so rocky a country, and the fresh water found farther up the Sound, most probably arose from the melting of the snow; there being no room to suspect, that any large river falls into the Sound, either from strangers coming down it, or from any other circumstance. The water of these rills is perfectly clear, and dissolves soap easily.

The climate, as far as we had any experience of it, is infinitely milder than that on the East coast of America, under the same parallel of latitude. The mercury in the thermometer never, even in the night, fell lower than 42°; and very often, in the day, it rose to 60°. No such thing as frost was perceived in any of the low ground; on the contrary, vegetation had made a considerable progress; for I met with grass that was already above a foot long."

Heavy rainfall combined with a mild coastal climate produced heavy forests of red and yellow cedar, fir, hemlock, spruce and pine. Heavily wooded mountains rose abruptly from the sea and extend inland in an almost unbroken succession of ranges approximately 100 miles wide by 1,300 miles long. From Puget Sound to the Alaskan panhandle a chain of islands separated by a complex maze of channels skirt the entire coast. Mountain valleys produced a series of deep narrow inlets penetrating far into the mountains. Four principal rivers, of medium size, cut their way to the sea: the Sitkine, Skeena, Nass and the Fraser. Fish and sea-mammals were the chief foods of the people of this area.

A relatively mild but stimulating climate coupled with a plentiful and easily obtained food supply caused the natives to have much leisure time. With an abundance of material for carving, the natives were able to develop construction and art skills to an admirable extent. The environment made possible the social structure about which their life was centered. Activities of the Northwest Coast people included waging war, making social visits, hunting and fishing, and the planning and execution of elaborate ceremonies. Although their region constituted one of the most distinct cultural areas, the various tribes or groups were independent of one another and spoke different languages. However, common environment, similar technologies, and shared beliefs caused life to be essentially the same for each of the seven major linguistic groups in the area. The Northwest Coast people led a rather easy life because there was no constant conflict with nature. Due to this great amount of leisure time their art forms reached an exceptional stage of development.

The seven major tribal groups were and are: Kwakiutl, Tlingit, Tsimshian, Haida, Bella Coola, Nootka, and Coast Salish. Although their origin has not been positively identified, these people bear a distinct resemblance to Asiatics. Siberian origins have been suggested as a strong possibility; however it is neither known when nor from where they came. A singularly important fact to be remembered is that the Northwest Coast people are not southern Eskimos.

The Northwest Coast people developed a distinctly aristocratic culture without developing agriculture or a knowledge of pottery making. Canoes were to these people what the horse was to the Plains Indians. Their active maritime life necessitated their development in the art of canoe building. Canoes were used to hunt whales and other smaller fish which were the mainstay of their diet.

When the Europeans first visited them, the Indians of the Northwest Coast lived a more abundant life than that of other American aborigines. Although they were prone to be warlike, there was little warfare between the Indians and white men. Due to items introduced by the coming of the earliest of the white traders and explorers, the Indians increased their output, further developed their ceremonial life, and generally expanded all their art forms.

During the eighteenth century many voyages were made by explorers from Spain, Russia, and England to the North Pacific coast. In addition to the many personal reasons which might cause a man to undertake such a venture was the possibility of new discovery and of proving or disproving the recorded findings of earlier voyagers.

Russians were among the earliest travelers in the area and were the first to establish trade with the natives. By 1778 there were a few representatives of the Russian government stationed at scattered points in the region to carry on the trade in furs. These representatives were assigned to their lonely posts for a period of four years.

Captain James Cook sailed the waters of the northern Pacific on a four year voyage undertaken at the command of the English king, George III, to make discoveries in the northern hemisphere in his two ships, the *Resolution* and the *Discovery*. He also checked listings on the maps of earlier voyagers, collected bits and pieces of useful information, and recorded volumes of reflections on the things he saw and experienced. In his records of Nootka Sound he described the inhabitants:

"The persons of the natives are, in general, under the common stature; but not slender in proportion, being commonly pretty full or plump, though not muscular. Neither doth the soft fleshiness seem ever to swell into corpulence, and many of the older people are rather spare, or lean. The visage of most of them is round and full; and sometimes, also, broad, with high prominent cheeks; and, above these, the face is frequently much depressed, or seems fallen in quite across between the temples; the nose also flattening at its base, with pretty wide nostrils, and a rounded point. The forehead rather low; the eyes small, black,



and rather languishing than sparkling; the mouth round, with large round thickish lips; the teeth tolerably equal and well set, but not remarkably white. They have either no beards at all, which was most commonly the case, or a small thin one upon the point of the chin; which does not arise from any natural defect of hair on that part, but from plucking it out more or less; for some of them, and particularly the old men, have not only considerable beards all over the chin, but whiskers, or mustachios; both on the upper lip, and running from thence toward the lower jaw obliquely downward. Their eye-brows are also scanty, and always narrow; but the hair on the head is in great abundance, very coarse and strong; and, without a single exception, black, straight and lank, or hanging down over the shoulders. The neck is short; the arms and body have no particular mark of beauty or elegance in their formation, but are rather clumsy; and the limbs, in all are very small in proportion to the other parts, and crooked, or ill-made, with large feet badly shaped, and projecting ankles. This last defect seems, in a great measure, to arise from their sitting so much on their hams or knees, both in their canoes and houses.

"Their colour we could never positively determine, as their bodies were incrustated with paint and dirt; though, in particular cases, when these were well rubbed off, the whiteness of the skin appeared almost to equal that of Europeans; though rather of that pale effete cast which distinguished those of our Southern nations. Their children, whose skins had never been stained with paint, also equalled ours in whiteness. During their youth, some of them have no disagreeable look, if compared to the generality of the people; but this seems to be entirely owing to the particular animation attending that period of life; for, after attaining a certain age, there is hardly any distinction. Upon the whole, a very remarkable sameness seems to characterize the countenance of the whole nation; a dull phlegmatic want of expression, with very little variation, being strongly marked in all of them.

"The women are nearly of the same size, colour, and form, with the men; from whom it is not easy to distinguish them, as they possess no natural delicacies sufficient to render their persons agreeable; and hardly any one was seen, even amongst those who were in the prime of life, who had the least pretensions to be called handsome. Their common dress is a flaxen garment, or mantle, ornamented on the upper edge by a narrow strip of fur, and, at the lower edge, by fringes or tassels . . ."

And of the appearance of natives of another group of Northwest Coast Indians seen in Prince William Sound he reports:

"The natives, who came to make us several visits while we were in the Sound, were generally not above the common height; though many of them were under it. They were square, or strong chested; and the most disproportioned part of their body seemed to be their heads, which were very large; with thick, short necks; and large, broad or spreading faces; which, upon the whole, were flat. Their eyes, though not small, scarcely bore a proportion to the size of their faces; and their noses had full, round points, hooked, or turned up at the tip. Their teeth were broad, white, equal in size and evenly set. Their hair was black, thick, straight and strong; and their beards, in general,

thin or wanting; but the hairs about the lips of those who have them, were stiff or bristly and frequently of a brown colour. And several of the elderly men had even large and thick, but straight beards.

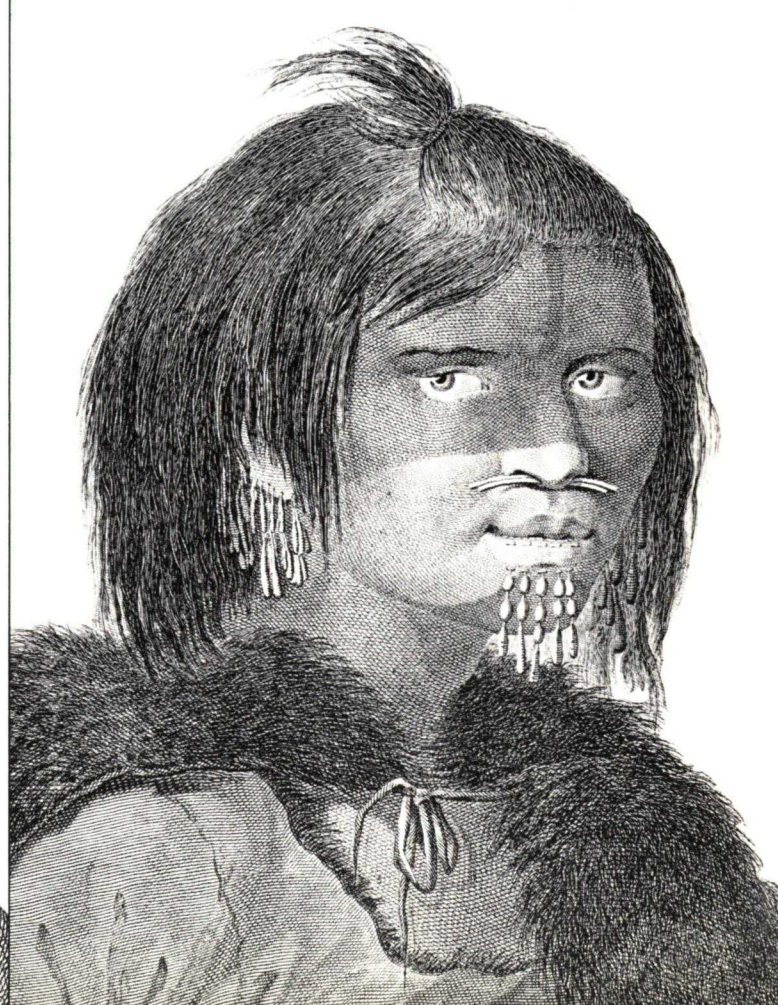
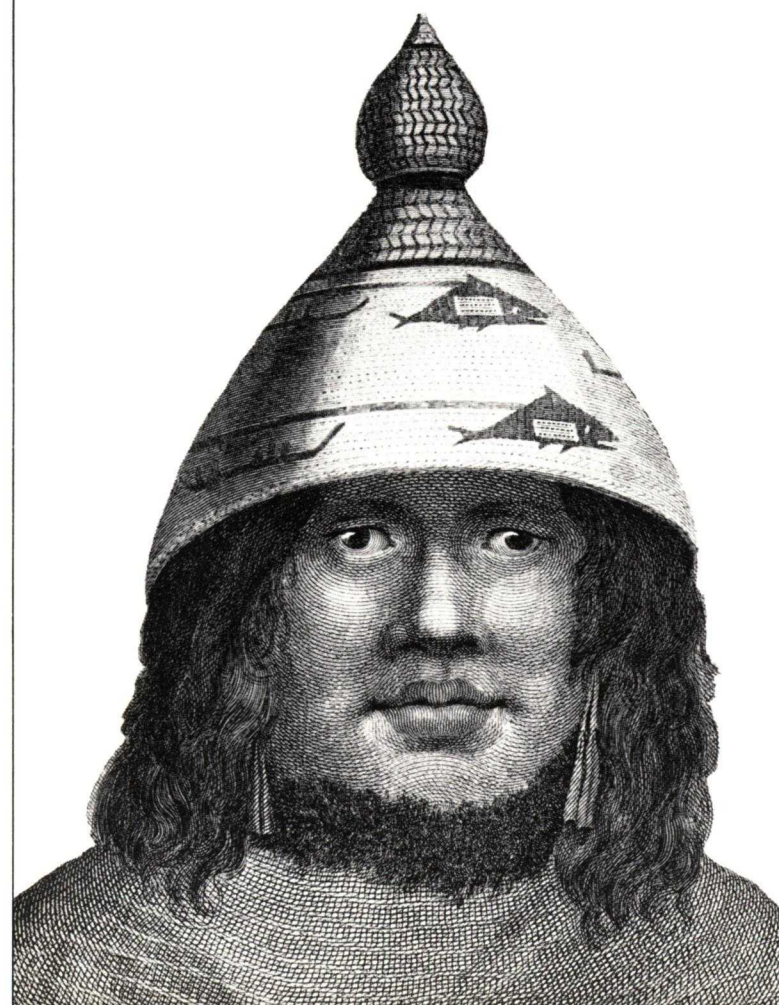
"Though, in general, they agree in the make of their persons, and largeness of their heads, there is a considerable variety in their features; but very few can be said to be of the handsome sort, though their countenance commonly indicates a considerable share of vivacity, good-nature and frankness. And yet some of them had an air of sullenness and reserve. Some of the women have agreeable faces; and many are easily distinguishable from the men by their features, which are more delicate; but this should be understood chiefly of the youngest sort, or middle-aged. The complexion of some of the women, and of the children, is white; but without any mixture of red.

"The men commonly wear the hair cropt round the neck and forehead; but the women allow it to grow long; and most of them tie a small lock of it on the crown. Both sexes have the ears perforated with several holes, about the outer and lower part of the edge, in which they hang little bunches of beads made of the same tubulous shelly substance used for this purpose by those of Nootka. The septum of the nose is also per-

forated; . . . But the most uncommon and unsightly ornamental fashion, adopted by some of both sexes, is their having the under lip slit, or cut, quite through, in the direction of the mouth, a little below the swelling part. This incision, which is made even in the sucking children, is often above two inches long; and either by its natural retraction, when the wound is fresh, or by repetition of some artificial management, assumes the true shape of lips, and becomes so large as to admit the tongue through. This happened to be the case, when the first person having this incision was seen by one of the seamen, who called out, that the man had two mouths; and, indeed, it does not look unlike it. In this artificial mouth they stick a flat, narrow ornament, made chiefly out of a solid shell or bone, cut into little narrow pieces, like small teeth, almost down to the base or thickest part, which has a small projecting bit at each end that supports it when put into the divided lip. . . . Others have the lower lip only perforated into separate holes; and then the ornament consists of as many distinct shelly studs, whose points are pushed through these holes, and their heads appear within the lip, as another row of teeth immediately under their own. . . . Upon the whole, I have no where seen savages who take more pains than these people do, to ornament, or rather to disfigure their persons."

In the eighteenth century and throughout much of the nineteenth, the behavior of the Northwest Coast Indians was determined by hereditary social rank. It was the desire of everyone to hold and maintain high social position for himself, his family, and the chief of his family. The display and lavish distribution of wealth was the basis for social eminence. The attitudes and activities necessary for maintaining status determined the day to day actions of each person. The wealth of the chief was a representation of the entire family's wealth.

The social system was a complex affair varying in different regions from matrilineal to patrilineal descendency. The children received their names, rights, and privileges from the mother's side of the family in most of the northern tribes, and from the father's family in the south. In either case, the family believed that they were descendants of the human form of some supernatural being come to earth to begin their genealogical line. This belief was the foundation for their use of specific "totem" symbols and crests, special dances, and ceremonial duties. Whatever method was used to determine the person of the chief, he was always recognized as the head of a family and the final authority for his entire group.



Far left, A Woman of Nootka Sound

"The women are nearly of the same size, colour, and form, with the men; from whom it is not easy to distinguish them, as they possess no natural delicacies sufficient to render their persons agreeable; and hardly any one was seen, even amongst those who were in the prime of life, who had the least pretensions to be called handsome."

—Captain James Cook

Middle, A Woman of Prince William's Sound

"Some of the women have agreeable faces; and many are easily distinguishable from the men by their features, which are more delicate; but this should be understood chiefly of the youngest sort, or middle-aged."

—Captain James Cook

Near left, A Man of Prince William's Sound

"... very few can be said to be of the handsome sort, though their countenance commonly indicates a considerable share of vivacity, good-nature and frankness."

—Captain James Cook

Drawings by J. Webber, artist with Cook's expedition, reproduced here from original engravings made to accompany the publication of Cook's reports.



The chief of the family group held the most exalted position in their society as well as having control of the family wealth and possessions. Social ranks were graded from the chief down to positions of no importance. Slaves were considered property and held no social position at all. Valued professions were frequently passed from one generation to another, with the exceptionally talented or inspired artist being highly honored.

The shaman was a kind of priest or medicine man who used magic to cure the sick, to divine the hidden and to control events. His appointment by the spirits was believed to be revealed by his behavior pattern as a child. Though he might be trained for this reason, the shaman's success depended on his ability to convince the people of his tribe that he had received his power from various supernatural spirits. He dealt in all interpretations of supernatural signs and indications to the people. Healing, warfare, weather predictions, and informative predictions about the hunt were some of the shaman's duties. For healing he sometimes used herbs, potions, and poultices, as well as incantations and ceremonies to drive out the evil spirits.

The family myth was the major theme of each family and represented the ancestor and his relations with supernatural beings. The family crests, house posts, grave posts, and totems, as well as clothing and many utility items, all carried various representations of the family myth. There was nothing sacred or religious about totems. They were simply a tangible means of recording important events or of displaying the owner's mythological genealogy. For the most part totems were covered with semi-human or semi-animal mythological beings.

It is believed that the totem evolved from early house posts in the late 18th century when tools were obtained from the white man. These tools enabled the native carvers to experiment with more difficult and intricate designs. Totems were made exclusively by the Northwest Coast Indians. The earlier totems probably were painted in red, black and white pigments. Totem art reached its peak of development between 1840 and 1880. Ever increasing contact with the white man caused the breakdown of tradition, and the custom of raising totems was gradually abandoned.

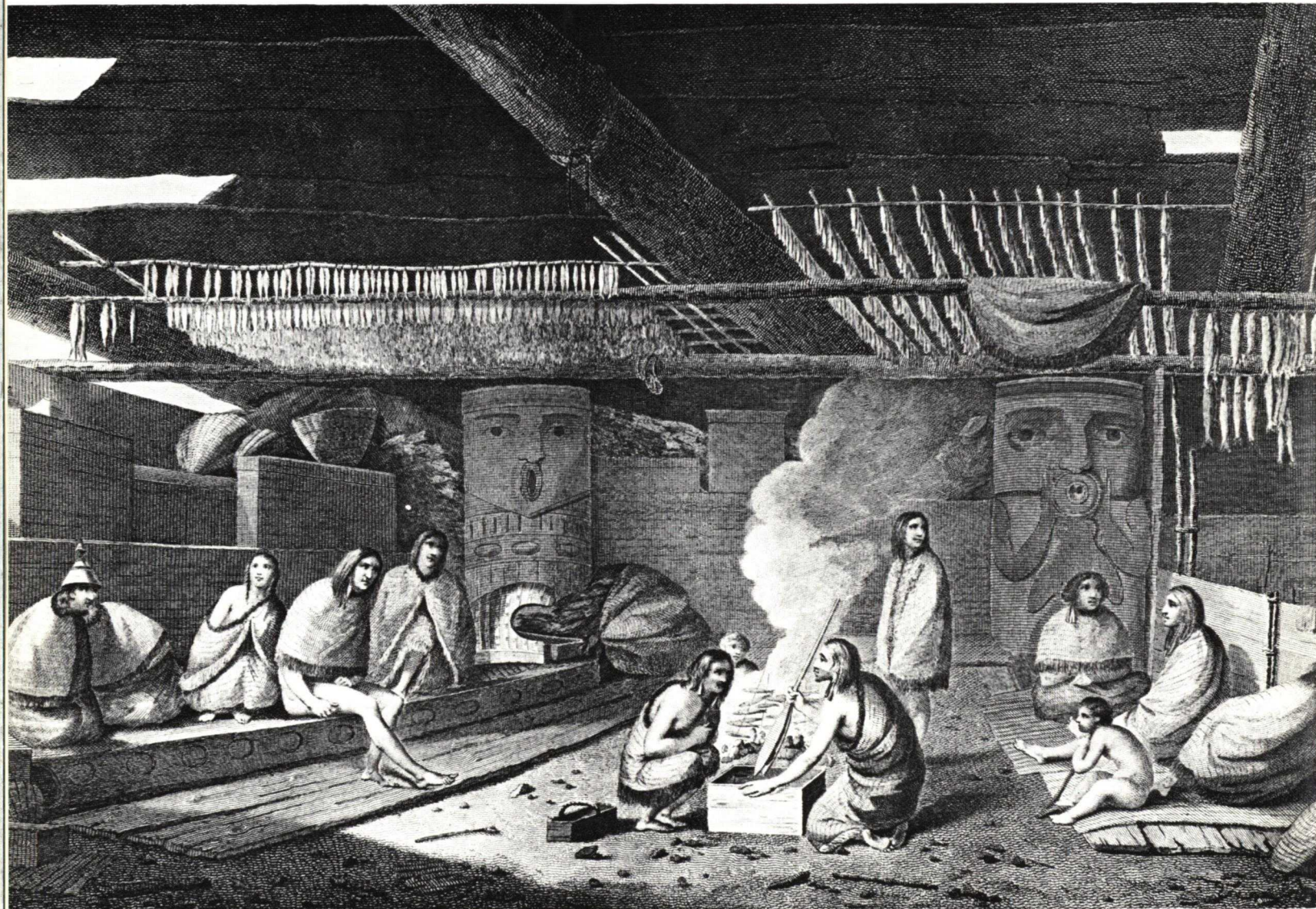
Although he recorded seeing no totems, Captain Cook reported on house posts:

"... amidst all the filth and confusion that are found in the houses, many of them are decorated

with images. These are nothing more than the trunks of very large trees, four or five feet high, set up singly, or by pairs, at the upper end of the apartment, with the front carved into a human face; the arms and hands cut out upon the sides, and variously painted; so that the whole is a truly monstrous figure. . . . A mat, by way of curtain, for the most part, hung before them, which the natives were not willing, at all times, to remove; and when they did unveil them, they seemed to speak of them in a very mysterious manner. It should seem that they are, at times, accustomed to make offerings to them; if we can draw this inference from their desiring us, as we interpreted their signs, to give something to these images, when they drew aside the mats that covered them. It was natural, from these circumstances for us to think that they were representatives of their gods, or symbols of some religious or superstitious object: and yet we had proofs of the little real estimation they were in; for with a small quantity of iron or brass, I could have purchased all the gods (if their images were such) in the place. I did not see one that was not offered to me: and I actually got two or three of the very smallest sort. "It should seem that Mr. Webber [artist] was obliged to repeat his offerings pretty frequently, before he could be permitted to finish his drawing of these images. His view of the inside of a Nootka house, in which these images are represented, will convey a more perfect idea of them than any description. The following account in his own words:

"While I was employed, a man approached me with a large knife in his hand, seemingly displeased, when he observed that my eyes were fixed on two representations of human figures, which were placed at one end of the apartment, carved on planks, of a gigantic proportion, and painted after their custom. However, I took as little notice of him as possible, and proceeded; to prevent which, he soon provided himself with a mat, and placed it in such a manner as to hinder my having any longer a sight of them. Being pretty certain that I could have no future opportunity to finish my drawing, and the object being too interesting to be omitted, I considered that a little bribery might probably have some effect. Accordingly I made an offer of a button from my coat, which being of metal, I thought they would be pleased with. This, instantly produced the desired effect. For the mat was removed, and I was left at liberty to proceed as before. Scarcely had I seated myself, and made a beginning, when he returned and renewed his former practice, continuing it till I had parted with every single button; and when he saw that he had completely stripped me, I met with no farther obstruction."

The Inside of a House in Nootka Sound, engraving by J. Webber
*"... amidst all the filth and confusion that are found in the
 houses, many of them are decorated with images."*
 —Captain James Cook



Later while reflecting upon the political and religious institutions established among the natives, Cook states:

"... It cannot be supposed that we should learn much. This we could observe, that there are such men as Chiefs, who are distinguished by the name or title of Acweek, and to whom the others are, in some measure, subordinate. But, I should guess, the authority of each of these great men extends no farther than the family to which he belongs, and who own him as their head. These Acweeks were not always elderly men; from which I conclude that this title came to them by inheritance. "I saw nothing that could give the least insight into their notions of religion, besides the figures before mentioned, called by them, Klumma. Most probably these were idols; but as they frequently mentioned the word acweek, when they spoke of them, we may, perhaps, be authorized to suppose that they are the images of some of their ancestors, whom they venerate as divinities. But all this is mere conjecture; for we saw no act of religious homage paid to them; nor could we gain any information."

An exceptionally peculiar custom among the Northwest Coast tribes, brought about by their desire to maintain social status and to gain prestige, was the "potlatch." Guests were invited to eat the feast, see the dancing, hear the singing, view the costumed performances, and to be the recipients of a formal distribution of gifts. Although details of the potlatch differed among the tribes, the basic idea was always the same. The more spectacular the pageant and impressive the gifts, the greater the reward of prestige for the giver of the potlatch and his family. Although the giver of the potlatch was sometimes left destitute, he was potentially richer than before because propriety dictated that when others gave potlatches they must return greater gifts than they had gotten.



Northwest Coast Indian
wooden ceremonial necklace
Gilcrease Anthropological
Collection

The winter season was spent in ceremonial life and in painting, carving, and weaving the items necessary for the pageantry. This was the time when they fashioned and repaired implements and designed elaborate masks and costumes for the winter season's social activities. The winter ceremonials included the giving of names to the children of important families, building houses, erecting totems, and holding memorial services. Long winter evenings were spent around the fire, singing, dancing, story telling, watching plays, and playing games.

The religion of the people of the Northwest Coast involved the use of prayers and offerings as well as magic spells, fetishes, and taboos. Most believed in a supreme being called the "Creator," as well as many lesser beings of divine origin.

They believed in reincarnation and transmigration. They believed that the greatest powers of nature dwelt principally in large animals and birds which were thought of almost as gods. The lesser beings were seldom ranked in any particular order. Some were exalted in one tribe while others held high positions with tribes in other areas. The raven enjoyed an almost universal popularity as "the changer," having a combined force of good and evil, with good predominant.

The deities, both mythological and animal, were the favorite subjects used by the Northwest Coast tribes in all their art forms. Outstanding among the tribal cultures of the world in material artistry, they were skilled in weaving baskets and blankets, painting, and working in copper, ivory, and stone. Their greatest accomplishments were in their many forms of wood carving.

In 1778, Captain Cook remarked about the art of the Northwest Coast Indians:

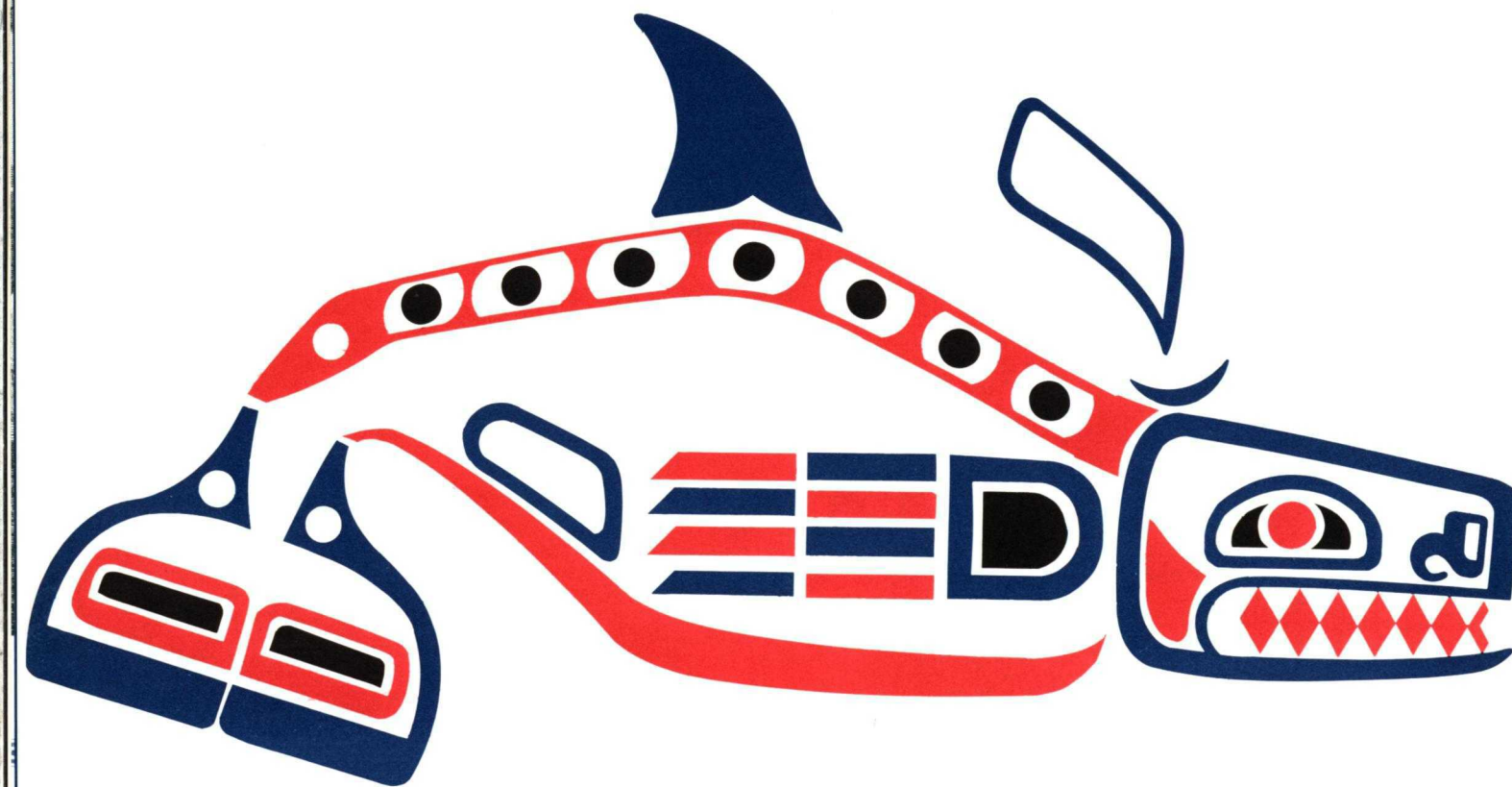
"To their taste or design in working figures upon their garments, corresponds their fondness for carving, in everything they make of wood. Nothing is without a kind of freeze-work, or the figure of some animal upon it; which is often cut out even upon their stone and their bone weapons. The general design of all these things is perfectly sufficient to convey a knowledge of the object they are intended to represent. They not only preserve, with great exactness, the general character of their own faces, but finish the more minute parts, with a degree of accuracy in proportion, and neatness in execution. The strong propensity of this people to works of this sort, is remarkable, in a vast variety of particulars. Small whole human figures; representations of birds, fish, and land and sea animals, models of their household utensils and of their canoes, were found amongst them in great abundance.

"The imitative arts being nearly allied, no wonder that, to their skill in working figures in their garments, and carving them in wood, they should add

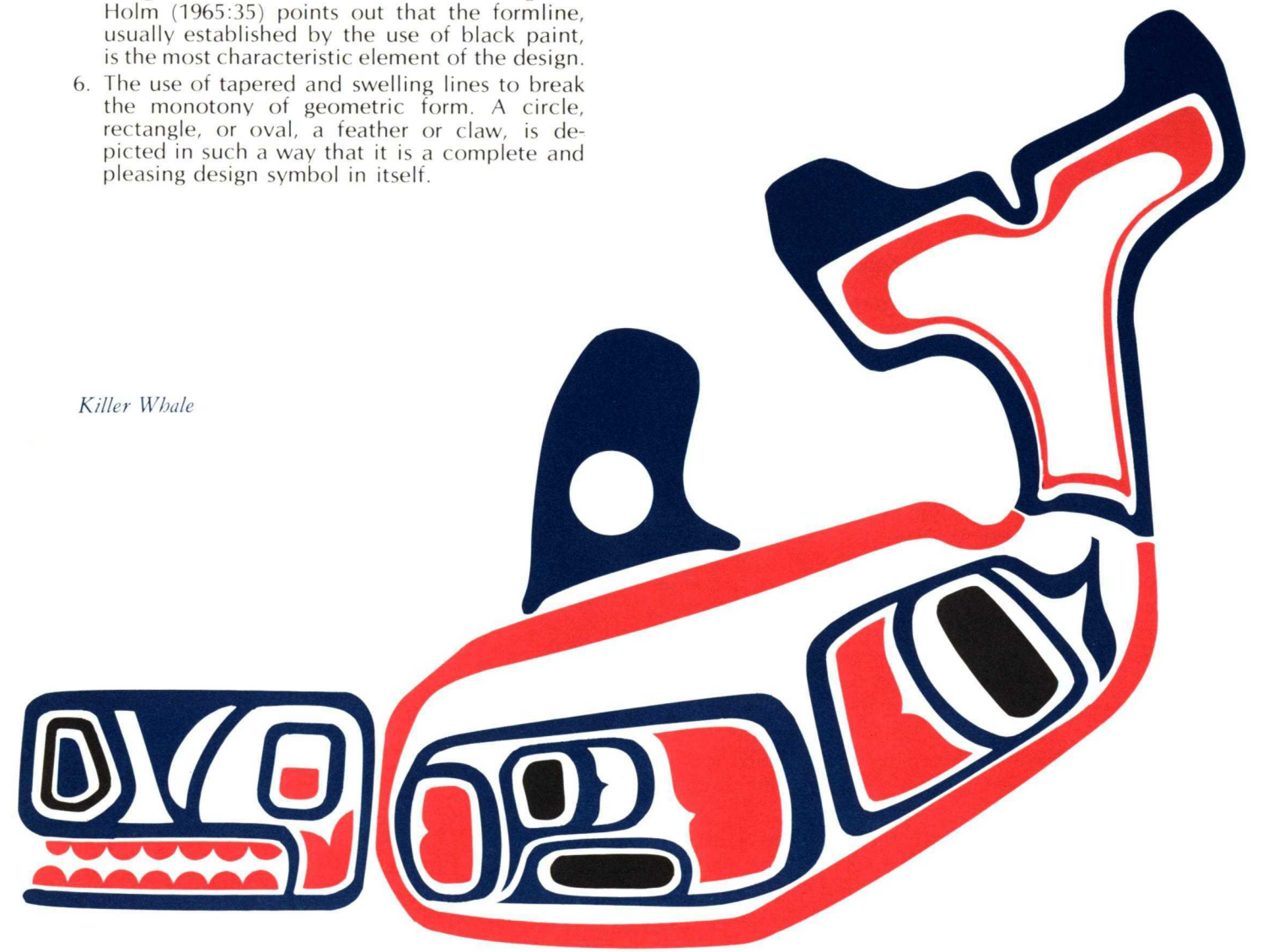
that of drawing them in colours. We have sometimes seen the whole process of their whale-fishery painted on the caps they wear. This, serves to shew, that though there be no appearance of the knowledge of letters amongst them, they have some notion of a method of commemorating and representing actions in a lasting way, independently of what may be recorded in their songs and traditions. They have also other figures painted on some of their things; but it is doubtful if they ought to be considered as symbols, that have certain established significations, or only the mere creation of fancy and caprice. . . . Their great dexterity in works of wood, may, in some measure, be ascribed to the assistance they receive from iron tools. For, as far as we know, they use no other; at least, we saw only one chissel of bone. And though, originally, their tools must have been of different materials, it is not improbable that many of their improvements have been made since they acquired a knowledge of that metal, which now is universally used in their various wooden works.

Almost 200 years after Captain Cook's visit among the Northwest Coast Indians, research and extensive study have established similarities in special characteristics of Northwest coast painting. In her book, *Art of the Kwakiutl Indians and other Northwest Coast Tribes*, 1967, Audrey Hawthorn lists these characteristics:

1. The use of salient recognition features, such as beaks, claws, or fins, as a representation of the bird or animal portrayed.
2. Frequent use of a highly stylized symbol for the whole animal.
3. The use of "X-ray" painting to establish the design form of a whole animal, disposed over the area to be covered.
4. The establishment of a number of stylized design units such as sockets, joints, and eye forms, used interchangeably. The context reveals which anatomical feature they actually represent.
5. The avoidance of empty space where a design form or line will add to the interest of complexity. This embellishment is, however, done with sufficient restraint to maintain a proper integral balance of line form, and carving. Bill Holm (1965:35) points out that the formline, usually established by the use of black paint, is the most characteristic element of the design.
6. The use of tapered and swelling lines to break the monotony of geometric form. A circle, rectangle, or oval, a feather or claw, is depicted in such a way that it is a complete and pleasing design symbol in itself.
7. The use of texture to supply variation in design. The carved cross-hatching of a beaver tail or a wing feather is echoed by the use of painted cross-hatching—small parallel lines or shading. One or two colors are sufficient to add these important textural variations.
8. The acceptance of the form of the area to be treated. On columnar poles, the cylindrical form is the basic space determinant, and the figures rise one above another in relation to this shape, although occasionally a piece is mortised to the pole to form a bill, wings, arms, or hands. On a round crest hat, the painted design is constructed and placed quite differently.



Killer Whale





The Wolf Dance by Carl Woodring—1959
The Northwest Coast Indians had “secret societies” or fraternities for every purpose. Dancers, actors, singers

and others involved in the pageantry, each belonged to a separate club or organization.

Design was used for the decoration of all types of things. Household items, hunting and fishing gear as well as the implements of war were often adorned with designs.

The Northwest Coast people engaged in warfare for several reasons. Revenge was the most common, brought about by real or imaginary slights to the individual chief or to his entire family. Sometimes they had more practical reasons such as the acquiring of captives for slaves. They occasionally fought over the use of hunting and fishing territories or even for the honor of prestige in battle. War honors were much valued for they had to be won by the individual and could not be passed on by inheritance. The warriors were among the few in America who wore a form of body armor made of thin laths, bound together with sinews, making it quite flexible. Their weapons were bows and arrows which were held horizontally, spears, and a small ax which was similar to the common Plains Indian tomahawk.

Elaborate costumes were used by the Northwest Coast tribes both for ceremonies and for warfare. Observations were made by Captain Cook who was careful never to draw conclusions from inconclusive information:

“They have some [clothes] that seem to be used only on extraordinary occasions; either when they exhibit themselves as strangers, in visits of ceremony, or when they go to war. Amongst the first may be considered the skins of animals, such as wolves or bears, tied on in the usual manner, but ornamented at the edges with broad borders of fur, or of the woollen stuff manufactured by them, ingeniously wrought with various figures. These are worn either separately, or over their other common garments. On such occasions, the most common head-dress is a quantity of withe, or half beaten bark, wrapped about the head; which, at the same time, has various large feathers, particularly those of eagles, stuck in it or is entirely covered, or, powdered with small white feathers. The face, at the same time, is variously painted, having its upper and lower parts of different colours, the strokes appearing like fresh gashes; or it is besmeared with a kind of tallow, mixed with paint, which is afterward formed into a great variety of regular figures, and appears like carved work. Sometimes the hair is separated into small parcels, which are tied at intervals of about two inches. Thus dressed, they have a truly savage and incongruous appearance; but this is much heightened when they assume, what may be called, their monstrous decorations. These consist of an endless variety of carved wooden masks

or visors, applied on the face, or to the upper part of the head or forehead. Some of these resemble human faces, furnished with hair, beards, and eyebrows; others, the heads of birds, particularly of eagles, and the heads of land and sea-animals, such as wolves, deer and porpoises, and others. But in general, these representations much exceed the natural size; and they are painted, and often strewed with pieces of the foliaceous mica, which makes them glitter, and serves to augment their enormous deformity. They even exceed this sometimes, and fix on the same part of the head large pieces of carved work, resembling the prow of a canoe, painted in the same manner, and projecting to a considerable distance. So fond are they of these disguises, that I have seen one of them put his head into a tin kettle he had got from us, for want of another sort of mask. Whether they use these extravagant masquerade ornaments on any particular occasion, or diversion; or whether they be put on to intimidate their enemies when they go to battle, by their monstrous appearance; or as decoys when they go to hunt animals is uncertain.”

The daily lives of these people were generally spent at their routine duties. The men occupied themselves with hunting and fishing and the manufacture or repair of implements and weapons. Along with their house-keeping chores, the women gathered berries and roots and did the cooking. They spent extra hours weaving cedar fiber baskets, blankets, mats, hats, and clothing. Even the poorest commoners and slaves could be economically clothed in cedar fiber garments. They also made a highly servicable waterproof poncho of cedar bark to be used in the rainy season. It was the responsibility of the women to make fishing nets and to keep them repaired. In a Northwest Coast community there were also specialists who were paid for their work. Canoe builders and wood carvers were in this group.

Although fishing was the major occupation of all the Northwest Coast tribes, the Nootka were the only people who hunted large numbers of whales. Their cedar whaling canoe, about thirty feet long, held a crew of eight men. A whaling party was a community event with from three to ten canoes participating. These courageous whalers sometimes got as close as a yard from the whale before throwing their harpoons. Very little of the whale was wasted. Flesh and skin were eaten, sinew was used for making ropes, intestines were made into oil containers, and blubber was eaten or made into oil.

Salmon was the primary food of all the tribes. Halibut and other fish and a variety of wild berries were secondary foods. Occasionally they enjoyed octopus, shellfish, bear, or mountain goat. They

also ate several varieties of edible moss, wild lettuce and onions, seaweed, and roots. All their foods were dipped in an oil condiment before they were eaten.

The oil from the *Eulachon*, or candlefish, had many uses in the homes of all the Northwest Coast tribes and was considered an important trade item. Aside from its use as a condiment it was used to light their houses and to waterproof cooking boxes and other items.

The dwellings of the Northwest Coast tribes were mostly large community-built houses. The framework was covered with large adze-hewn planks with either a gabled or shed-type roof. A square smoke hole was cut in the roof for ventilating the smoke from the fires of the several related families who lived inside. The houses were usually built near the sea with the entrance end of the house facing the sea. There was usually a rear exit as well. The ownership of these multi-family dwellings was vested in the chief. This chief had a special area walled off with painted board screens which was considered off-limits to all unless invited. The remainder of the house was sub-divided among the other family groups. It was the custom to paint the house front with totemic symbols representing the family myth and identifying the owner.

Captain Cook visited a multi-family dwelling at Nootka Sound:

“On the inside, one may frequently see from one end to the other of these ranges of building without interruption. For though, in general, there be the rudiments, or rather vestiges, of separations on each side, for the accommodation of different families, they are such as do not intercept the sight; and often consist of no more than pieces of plank, running from the side toward the middle of the house; so that, if they were complete, the whole might be compared to a long stable, with a double range of stalls, and a broad passage in the middle. Close to the sides, in each of these parts, is a little bench of boards, raised five or six inches higher than the rest of the floor, and covered with mats, on which the family sit and sleep. These benches are commonly seven or eight feet long, and four or five broad. In the middle of the floor, between them, is the fire-place, which has neither hearth nor chimney.

“Their furniture consists chiefly of a great number of chests and boxes of all sizes, which are generally piled upon each other, close to the sides or ends of the house. . . . They are often painted black, studded with the teeth of different animals, or carved with a kind of freeze-work, the figures of birds or animals, as decorations. Their other domestic utensils are mostly square and oblong pails or buckets to hold water and other things;

A Man of Oonalashka, engraving by J. Webber
"To all appearance, they are the most peaceable, inoffensive people I ever met with. And, as to honesty, they might serve as a pattern to the most civilized nation upon earth."

— Captain James Cook



round wooden cups and bowls; and small shallow wooden troughs, about two feet long, out of which they eat their food; and baskets of twigs, bags of matting, etc. Their fishing implements, and other things also, lie or hang up in different parts of the house, but without the least order; so that the whole is a complete scene of confusion; and the only places that do not partake of this confusion are the sleeping benches that have nothing on them but the mats; . . ."

His reflections on their eating habits:
"Their manner of eating is exactly consonant to the nastiness of their houses and persons; for the troughs and platters, in which they put their food, appear never to have been washed from the time they were first made, and the dirty remains of a former meal are only swept away by the succeeding one. They also tear everything solid, or tough, to pieces, with their hands and teeth; for though they make use of their knives to cut off the larger portions, they have not, as yet, thought of reducing these to smaller pieces and mouthfuls, by the same means, though obviously more convenient and cleanly."

Although Captain Cook was often impressed with the artistic abilities of the natives, their eating habits made a much different impression on his highly refined taste. It was customary for the leaders and officers of such expeditions as Cook's to be members of the literate and refined elite of society. Often their reports give the reader a distorted or exaggerated view of the crudity of native

cultures. Perhaps those same natives would have been amazed to see Cook's men eat raw oysters. Cook gives this description of a native feast:

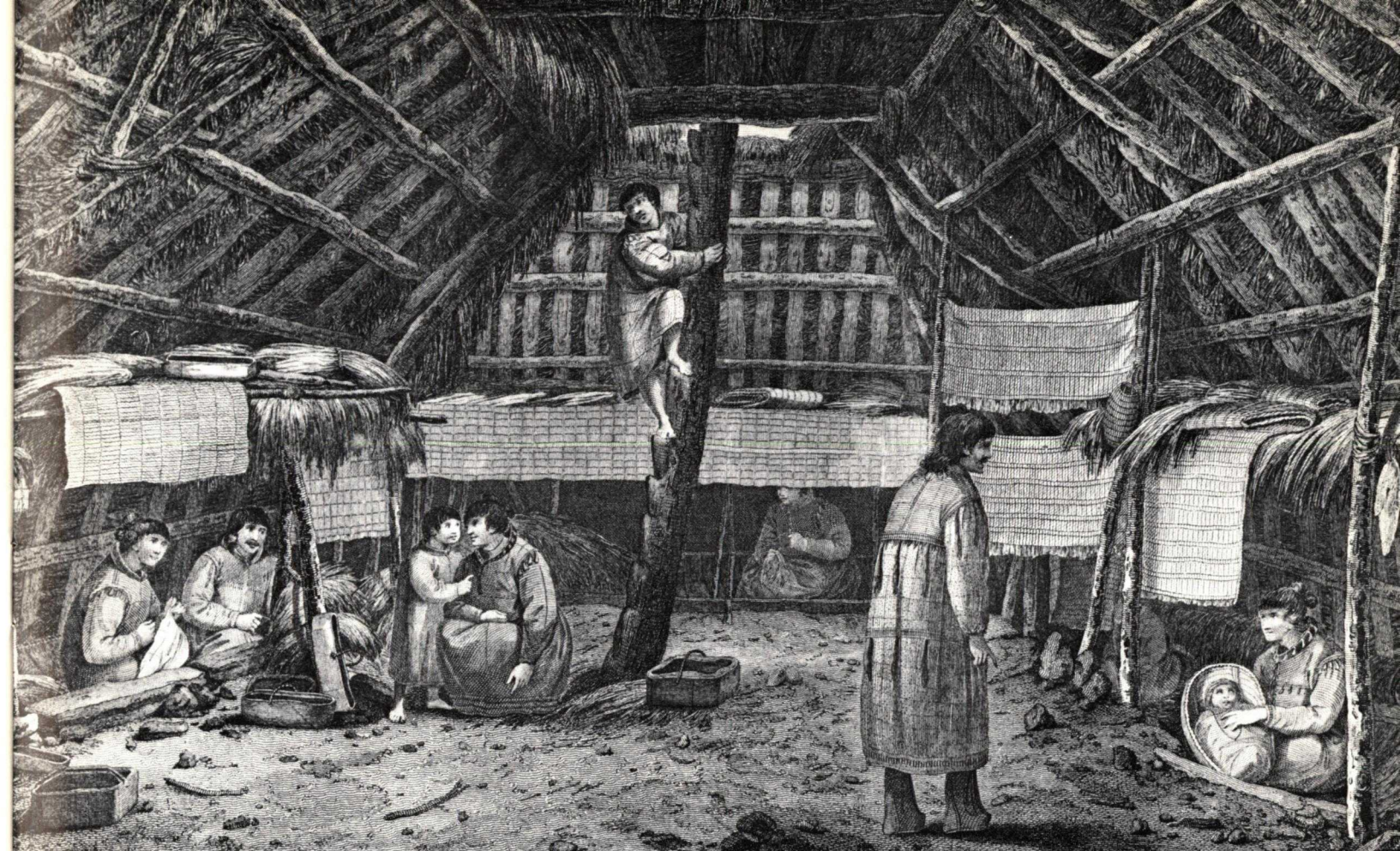
"I was once present, when the Chief of Oonalashka made his dinner of the raw head of a large halibut, just caught. Before any was given to the Chief, two of his servants eat the gills, without any dressing, besides squeezing out the slime. This done, one of them cut off the head of the fish, took it to the sea and washed it; then came with it, and sat down by the Chief; first pulling up some grass, upon a part of which the head was laid, and the rest was strewed before the Chief. He then cut large pieces of the cheeks, and laid these within the reach of the great man, who swallowed them with as much satisfaction as we should do raw oysters. When he had done, the remains of the head were cut in pieces, and given to the attendants, who tore off the meat with their teeth, and gnawed the bones like so many dogs."

After spending two months in the Northwest Coast area, Captain Cook and his crew set sail for a more northerly region. In October, 1877, they dropped anchor at Oonalashka, one of the Aleutian Islands. The natives of Oonalashka were different from those which Captain Cook had encountered in Nootka and Prince William Sounds. Their way of life combined the habits of some of the Northwest Coast peoples with those of the Eskimo. Cook said:

"To all appearance, they are the most peaceable, inoffensive people, I ever met with. And, as to honesty, they might serve as a pattern to the most civilized nation upon earth. . . . These people are rather low of stature, but plump and well shaped; with rather short necks; swarthy chubby faces; black eyes; small beards; and long, straight hair; which the men wear loose behind, and cut before, but the women tie up in a bunch."

As to their dress he states:
"Both sexes wear the same in fashion; the only difference is in the materials. The women's frock is made of seal skin; and that of the men, of the skins of birds; both reaching below the knee. This is the whole dress of the women. But, over the frock, the men wear another made of gut, which resists water; and has a hood to it, which draws over the head. Some of them wear boots; and all of them have a kind of oval snouted cap, made of wood, with a rim to admit the head. These caps are dyed with green and other colours; and round the upper part of the rim, are stuck the long bristles of some sea-animal, on which are strung glass beads; and on the front is a small image or two made of bone. . . . Some fix beads to the upper lip, under the nostrils; and all of them hang ornaments in their ears."

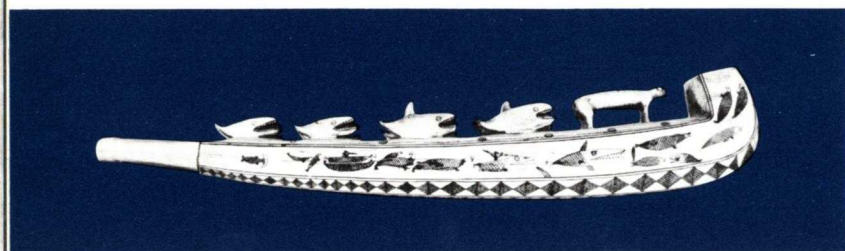
Fortunately Captain Cook seems to have been interested in many phases of the lives of the natives:



Inside of a House, Oonalashka, engraving by J. Webber
 Showing the entry hole in the roof of the house, with the ladder post in place.

Natives of Oonalashka and their Habitations, engraving by J. Webber.





Ivory Pipe Carved and Incised with Whales, Seals and other Sea-Animals, Eskimo. Gilcrease Anthropological Collection.

"Their household furniture consists of bowls, spoons, buckets, piggins or cans, matted baskets, and perhaps a Russian kettle or pot. All these utensils are very neatly made, and well formed; and yet we saw no other tools among them but the knife and the hatchet; that is, a small flat piece of iron, made like an adze, by fitting it into a crooked wooden handle. These were the only instruments we met with there, made of iron. . . . They did not seem to wish for more iron, or to want any other instruments, except sewing needles, their own being made of bone. With these they not only sew their canoes, and make their clothes, but also very curious embroidery. Instead of thread, they use the fibers of sinews, which they split to the thickness which each sort of work requires. All sewing is performed by the women. They are the taylor, shoemakers, and boat-builders, or boat-coverers; for the men, most probably, construct the frame of wood over which the skins are sewed. They make mats and baskets of grass, that are both beautiful and strong. Indeed, there is a neatness and perfection in most of their work, that shews they neither want ingenuity nor perseverance.

Still farther north, the region occupied by the Eskimos was a largely treeless seacoast and tundra which remained frozen throughout most of the year. An abundance of food from the sea was the primary reason the nomadic Eskimos remained in so inhospitable an area. Coupled with the extremely cold temperatures of the region the natives had to cope with long months of darkness followed by months of continual daylight. The Eskimo, physically and mentally adapted to the Arctic region, accepted it as a normal environment.

The name Eskimo was an Algonquin word meaning, "eaters of raw flesh." However, the Eskimos called themselves "Innuvit" which means "men" or "people." These people lived in small villages consisting of from twenty-five to one hundred people. The village had no chief and no form of government. The family was the principal group unit with the shaman as the most influential individual in tribal affairs.

The summer hunting parties traveled great distances to find game. Bear, deer, foxes, hares and birds were killed and stored for use in winter. During the winter the Eskimos lived primarily on the flesh of seal, whale and walrus. Meat was sometimes cooked over the house lamp, but often it was eaten raw.

The summer homes of the Eskimos were tents or "tupeks" made of animal skins. These same skins were often used to line the permanent winter homes. Contrary to popular belief, the snow and ice igloo was not the usual winter home of the Eskimos. In Alaska, most Eskimos built their homes of wood and stone covered with earth and snow and lined them with skins. The snow and ice igloo was considered a temporary or emergency dwelling. The houses were sparingly furnished with a long bench for lounging or sleeping, a house lamp, and various primitive utensils and containers.

The house lamps were important possessions. They were used for lighting and heating, as well as for cooking. Although they were made in a variety of sizes and shapes, they all had some common features. These multi-purpose fixtures were usually made of soapstone in the shape of a clamshell. Their moss wicks burned oil made from blubber.

One of the most important items in the winter camp was the wood supply. Since there was always a shortage of wood, the Eskimo was forced to resort to substitutes. Whale and seal blubber was made into oil for fuel. Ivory was available for carving tools, fasteners, weapons, sled runners, and parts for many other things. The Eskimo adapted the products of nature to all his needs.

The food supply and its storage were a primary concern in the winter camp due to the hungry dogs in camp and scavenging animals. The white whale, which tastes somewhat like pork, was a favorite food of the Eskimo who ate cubes of blubber like candy.

The clothing of Eskimo men and women as well as that of the children was styled alike. The skins of young reindeer or sometimes bird skins were used for underwear. Trousers of reindeer or seal skin were topped by several jackets. The outer one was made with a hood. The Eskimos wore high boots of waterproof seal skin for summer and reindeer skin for winter.

As traveling was a necessity for the nomadic Eskimo, the most common form was by dog sled in winter and by boat in summer. Eskimos were among the best of boat builders. The kayak was a frame of fine willow tied with rawhide and covered with the hides of walrus. These one or

two-man canoes, never more than twenty inches wide, were used primarily for hunting. A larger boat, the umiak or women's boat was used for transportation.

Captain Cook took advantage of his stay in Oonalashka to gather as much information as possible about the natives there and in the surrounding region. He also continued his search for an island called Alaschka by a Russian explorer named Staehlin. Cook recorded this discussion with the Russian representative of the trading post on Oonalashka:

"Both Ismyloff and the others affirmed, that they knew nothing of the continent of America to the Northward; and that neither Lieutenant Synd nor any other Russian, had ever seen it of late. They call it by the same name which Mr. Staehlin gives to his great island; that is, Alashka. Stachtan Nitada, as it is called in the modern maps, is a name quite unknown to these people, natives of the islands as well as Russians; but both of them know it by the name of America. From what we could gather from Ismyloff and his countrymen, the Russians have made several attempts to get a footing upon that part of this continent that lies contiguous to Oonalashka and the adjoining islands, but have always been repulsed by the natives; whom they describe as a very treacherous people. They mentioned two or three Captains, or Chief men, who had been murdered by them; and some of the Russians shewed us wounds which, they said, they had received there. . . . I have already observed, that the American continent is here called, by the Russians, as well as by the islanders, Alashka; which name, though it properly belong only to the country adjoining to Oonemak, is used by them when speaking of the American continent in general, which they know perfectly well to be a great land.

" . . . This is all the information I got from these people, relating to the geography of this part of the world; and I have reason to believe that this was all the information they were able to give. . . . that no Russian had ever seen any part of the continent of America to the Northward."

After all his investigations concerning the island of Alashka, Captain Cook concludes:

"If Mr. Staehlin was not grossly imposed upon, what could induce him to publish a map so singularly erroneous; and in which many of these islands are jumbled together in regular confusion, without the least regard to truth? And yet, he is pleased to call it a very accurate little map. Indeed, it is a map to which the most illiterate of his illiterate seafaring countrymen would have been ashamed to set his name."

Although Captain Cook did not find proof of Alaska's being an island, the information which he gathered along with his personal observations are more valuable today than if he could have simply verified an ancient map. The descendants of natives whose habits he recorded are still living in those regions but civilization brought to them by 200 years of association with the white man has long since changed their traditional ways and customs.



Eskimo Doll and Ball
Gilcrease Anthropological
Collection

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