



# Canada's First Peoples

[First Peoples](#)

[Contact & Conflict](#)

[Treaties & Change](#)

[The Metis & Rebellion](#)

[Production Credits](#)

[First Peoples Menu](#)  
[The Canada Site.com](#)  
[Boer War Museum](#)  
[Coming Back Alive](#)  
[Goldi Productions Ltd](#)  
[The Store](#)  
[Email Us](#)

## Northwest Coastal People

[Groups in  
this Region](#)

[Environment /  
Housing](#)

[Food /  
Hunting / Tools](#)

[Transportation /  
Migration](#)

[Family / Social Structure /  
Leadership](#)

[Tribal  
Relations / War](#)

The Northwest Coastal People lived on the west coast of Canada, occupying the western shore and the islands of British Columbia, and reaching up into the Yukon.

### Religion

- In Northwest Coast culture, their customs, beliefs, and history were passed down orally through stories, songs, and dances.
- They had stories about why certain things occurred, for example, the changes in season. There were also stories about each group and how they first appeared in this world. All of these stories were passed down to subsequent generations.
- The people of the Northwest believed that they were surrounded, at all times, by supernatural beings interfering with the natural world.
- In their culture, spirits were connected to all living things.
- The only link between the spirit world and the natural world was the 'Shamans' or 'Medicine Men'.



*Haida Raven Dancer*

### Shamans

- It was a Shaman's job to cure the sick, to ensure that there was adequate food, and to influence the weather. The belief was that they had the power to do all those things through an ability to communicate with the spirit world.
- Both men and women could have been Shamans, however, they were most often men.
- When someone took ill, it was believed to be an intervention by the spirit world, or a loss of the person's soul. Shamans were the only people who communicated directly with the spirits, so they were the only ones who could cure the sick.
- Shamans wore:
  - Bearskin robes
  - Aprons
  - Rattles
  - Skin drums
  - Charms
  - Necklaces
  - Masks (on some occasions)
- The Shamans used their rattles to summon up powers from the spirit world. Then they went into a trance, communicating directly with the spirits, asking them to cure the ill person.



*Shaman*



*Gitksan woman Shaman*



*Haida Shaman's rattle*



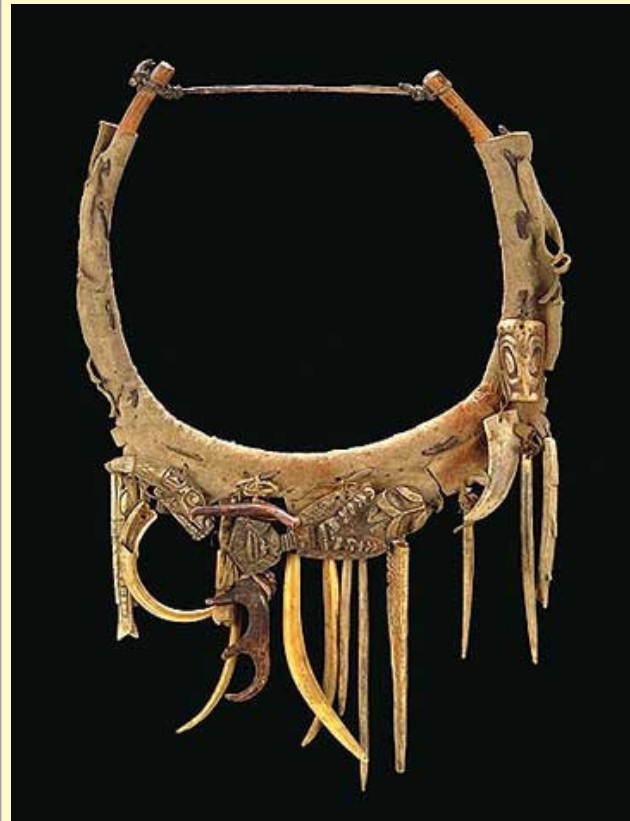
*Tsimshian Shaman curing boy*



*Shaman's dance wand*



*Shaman's charm*



*Shaman's necklace*

### Ceremonies

- 'Potlatch' was the name given to most Northwest Coast celebrations. It comes from the Nuu-chah-nulth word 'pachitle' meaning 'to give'.
- A potlatch was a big celebration that often took more than a year to plan. The ceremony usually corresponded with a person's change in social status, for example, marriage, birth, death, and coming of age. It included a feast, singing and costumed dancers, and some potlatches lasted as long as two to three weeks.
- Most importantly, though, potlatches became a way in which families could show off their wealth to others.
- Each person invited to a Potlatch received



*Potlatch dancers*

gifts related to their social rank. Some examples of gifts: canoes, slaves, carved dishes, and eulachon oil. The more wealth that a family gave away (as gifts), the more prestige was bestowed on them.



*Masked dancer*



*Kwakwakw'wakw wolf dancer*

#### Winter Dances

- Winter Dances were staged performances with masked dancers that created an illusion of death or of direct contact with supernatural powers.



*Costumed dancers*

#### Dignity Potlatch

- The most important social event of the coastal people was a huge feast they called the potlatch.
- A chief would call people to attend a potlatch to celebrate a birth, or marriage, or to mark the finishing of a new house.
- He would honour everyone with gifts, the more lavish the better, to show everyone how successful a leader he was.
- A Dignity Potlatch was held if an important person, like



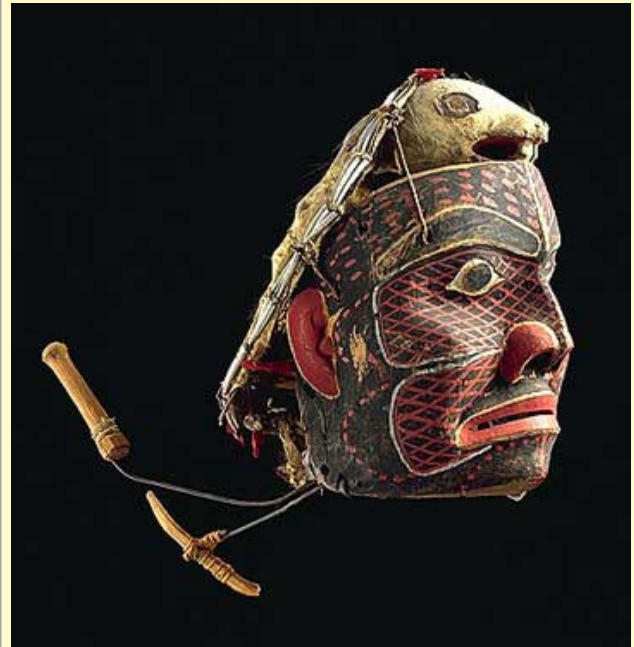
*Chilkat dancer*

a Chief, had an embarrassing moment, like falling out of a canoe. The purpose of this smaller potlatch was to offset any humiliation the person suffered.

- In Northwest Coast culture, a person could not be laughed at, or they lost all dignity. Therefore, a potlatch reestablished some dignity.



*Haida performance mask*



*Haida dance mask*



*Potlatch puppetry mask*



*Closed transformation mask*



*Half-open transformation mask*



*Open transformation mask*

## Art

- Art played a major part in Northwest Coast culture.
- They were known for their:
  - Basketry (basket, hats)
  - Woodworking (masks, totem poles)
  - Weaving (Chilkat blankets)



*This Haida cedar bark basket would have been used to collect clams.*

## Basketry

- The Northwest Coast people used baskets for storage and trade.
- Hats were particularly important for the Northwest people because they were used as protection from the rain.



*Painting baskets was common, like this Tlingit basket.*



*Haida yellow cedar hat*



*Like baskets, hats were routinely painted.*

### Woodworking

- Woodworking, particularly carving, was an art form passed down from generation to generation. They made totem poles, canoes, 'bentwood' boxes, sculptures, and masks.
- Totem Poles
  - Totem poles were large carved poles used to display the clan crest and social status of a family.
  - The poles were carved directly out of cedar trees, so some were up to 15 metres tall.
  - Most totem poles had both animal and human forms carved into them, usually representing the family crest.
  - Totem poles were usually painted black, red, blue, and sometimes white and yellow.
  - In Nuu-chah-nulth and Kwakwak'wakw culture, a poles with a bird on top showed the house of the Chief.
  - It usually took help from most of the village to raise the totem pole.
- Canoes
  - The art of carving canoes was passed down from father to son, and no one, except the



*Haida Totem*

- official canoe carvers was allowed to carve the canoes.
- Bentwood Boxes
    - Bentwood boxes were made from a single cedar plank. The plank was steamed and then bent at three corners and pegged together. Bentwood boxes were used to serve and store food, and were also common at ceremonial feasts.
  - Sculptures
  - Masks
    - Northwest Coast carved masks were an important part of all ceremonies.
    - The Haida had a transformation mask as a common theme was metamorphosis.
    - Masks in copper was a sign of wealth.



*Kwakwaka'wakw totem pole*



*Nuu-chah-nulth totem*





*Nuu-chah-nulth Chief's house totem*



*Totem poles at Kispiox*



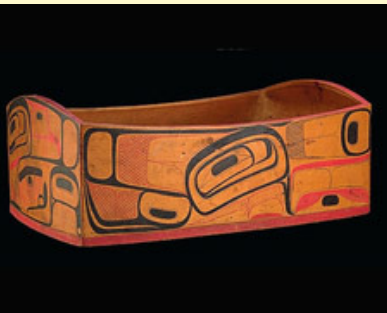
*Painted Haida house post*



*Kwakwak'wakw canoes*



*Bentwood box for storage*



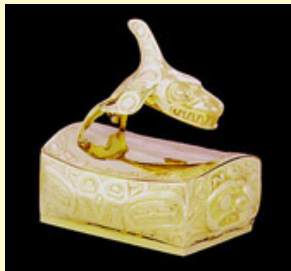
*Painted Haida bentwood dish*



*Decorated bentwood box*



*Tsimshian frog carving*



*Haida gold box*



*Bear carving*



*Haida Pipe*



*Haida Raven rattle*



*Beaver mask*



*Haida Shaman mask*



*Nuxalk headdress*



*Haida copper mask*



*Haida Thunderbird mask*



*Haida frogprince*



*Tlingit Bird mask*



*Nuxalk sunmask*



*Haida transformation mask - closed*



*Haida transformation mask - open*



*Coast Salish moonmask*



*Coast Salish sunmask*

**Weaving**

- Women were responsible for all the weaving, and they made clothing, mats, and bed sheets.
- For weaving the women used softened cedar bark strips or cattails, with coloured grasses to add colour. The materials were collected during the summer months and then dried.
- One of the most common things they wove was the chilkat blanket.



*Haida woman weaving*



*Weaving inside a longhouse*



*Chilkat blanket*

### Clothing

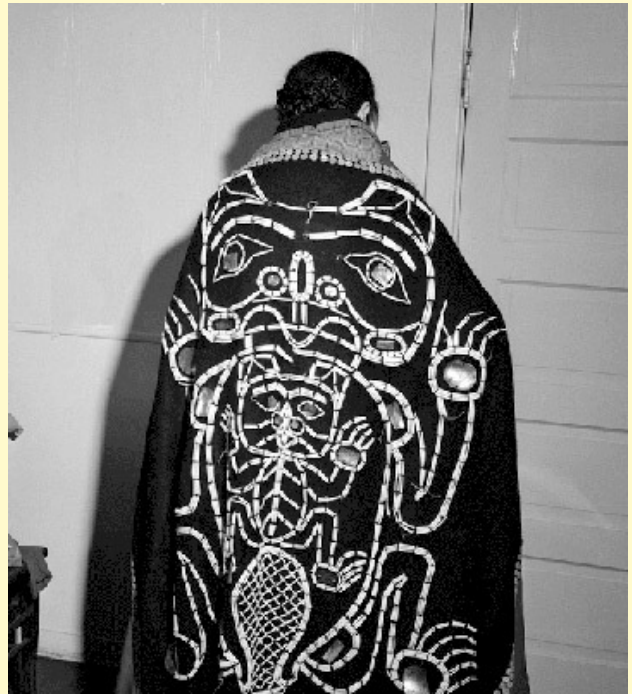


*Haida leather cape*

- The people of the Northwest Coast wore very little clothing, except when it was cold.
- In the warmer months, men would often go naked, and women would only wear bark skirts.
- The women made most of the clothing out of softened cedar wood or bark, animal leather, and wool.



*Salish goat wool coat*



*Haida beaver cape*

#### Rainy Weather

- Since it rained a lot on the Northwest Coast, clothing was more important for blocking the rain than for keeping them warm.
- They wore bark capes and spruce hats as protection against the rain.



*Haida Spruce root hat*

#### Social Status

- Northwest Coast society was built on personal wealth and social status, so they typically wore clothes that followed the class system.
- If a person was rich, they showed it by wearing fancier clothes and jewelry.
- Chiefs (the highest ranking individuals) wore a chilkat blanket, dance apron, leggings and mocassins.



*Two Haida Chiefs with Chilkat blankets and headdresses*

#### Chilkat Blankets

- Chilkat Blankets are one of the most well known symbols of Northwest Coast culture.
- The colourful blankets worn for special occasions, were woven from goat's wool and cedar bark, and then painted.



*Chilkat blanket*



*Man with Chilkat blanket*



*Chilkat shirt*

[Groups in this Region](#)

[Environment / Housing](#)

[Food / Hunting / Tools](#)

[Transportation / Migration](#)

[Family / Social Structure / Leadership](#)

[Tribal Relations / War](#)

[Back to the top](#)

[Back to Canada's First Peoples Menu](#)

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