

R. Phillips A

WOOD

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Since ancient time the Chinook wind has rolled in from the Ocean and washed the red cedar, Douglas Fir, yellow cedar, hemlock and spruce on the Pacific Northwest Coast, and provided a people with means of great material and spiritual wealth. Even now these forest giants drink in moisture and oxygen from this friendly source; but they are in greatly diminished numbers just as the people who first drew sustenance from them are also diminished in number since the coming of the white man and his civilization. *

It has been said that the particular circumstances which make lawful the deliberate intrusion of a 'superior people' into another country are connected with the use that the conquered people have made of their resources:(1)

Because the Northwest Coast is a land where mountains rise sheer from the water's edge, valleys are bays and inlets, and what-would-be farmland is permanently inundated, (agriculture was not practiced by the original inhabitants except for the cultivation of small plants of native tobacco) the material culture of the coastal tribes (based by necessity on the shoals of salmon that annually ascended the creeks and rivers to spawn, and which provided them with an assured supply of food throughout the year (supplemented by other fish and wild animal meat) and on the abundant stands of free-grained cedar trees that furnished timber for dwellings, canoes, household utensils and bark for clothing and mats.²

That woodcarving was native to the Northwest Coast was borne out by Chirikof who landed men near Sitka in 1791 and found houses made of smooth boards and carved as well. In 1787 the explorer, Dixon, in trading for sea otter skins,

found that the edge was desired to the exclusion of all other trade goods and that edges were even given to children as presents. As the edge is the principal tool used in carving totem poles, making house planks and canoes, considerable emphasis must have been given to woodworking of all kinds at this time.² The presence of large trees whose wood might easily be worked was particularly favorable to the development of light specialized canoes and of elaborate houses, but could scarcely have determined the particular forms that such circumstances took.⁶ The system of competitive ranking and obligatory feasts among the Northwest Coast peoples was undoubtedly enormous stimulus to the intensive exploitation of natural resources and to the elaboration of crafts and arts.³ Plank houses and dugout canoes could have been constructed outside the area where they occur but the rarity of suitable material⁴ tended to restrict their spread.

The lack of emphasis on elaborateness in woodworking is a factor of social environment which inhibits the diffusion of forms of tools specially adapted to such purposes⁶ and as a prime requisite of Northwest Coast art was that it serve a useful end, (a useful object as a spoon, dish, box, paddle or weapon is made and then decorated) the artist is constantly restrained by the shape and size of the object to be decorated,⁶ as well as by the available tools and the shape of the individual piece of wood itself.⁴

Different woods served different purposes:

Totempoles were carved of red Western Cedar, while harder "Alaska Cedar" was used for fancy carving of small articles, red cedar being too soft and splintery for fine work. The canoes and houses were also made of red cedar. Some small art carvings were made of alder, but alder was used

primarily for food dishes since it imparts no flavor or odor and is durable. ⁴ Maple was used for rattles and spoons. Grebepple for staffs, canes and mallets (being the hardest wood in the area). Spruce was used in some districts for house construction, but it together with hemlock served principally as fuel. ⁵ On the Coast, drift hemlock was preferred for smoking fish, but up the rivers, alder and cottonwood were used for smoking fish and other purposes.

In the utilization of wood, great cleverness was shown on the part of the Indian, for there was not only the splitting of planks by wedging, carving with knives and adzes but also the steaming and bending of boards to facilitate box making and in shaping canoes; also in producing abruptly curved fish hooks used for halibut and cod fishing as well as for other articles of usefulness.

The joining of wood by sewing is one of the special accomplishments of the Northwest Coast Indian, in which great skill is shown in using spruce root threads that are often concealed in deep grooves so as not to detract from the appearance of the finished product (cracks in canoes and other objects were also mended in this way).

Ingenuity was shown by the placing of large timbers and planks in position in house building, controlling the cleavage of wood⁴, in the finish-treatment given by edging small nicks the size of a dime all over the surface⁶ and in the securing by sewing of the large wooden sails used on canoes.⁴

Not only were household articles made of wood but also the very clothing that the people themselves wore:

The comparatively warm climate made excessive clothing unnecessary, so that actually little clothing was

worn, being used primarily as a protection from the rain. The women wore aprons of shredded bark tied around the waist and woven cedar bark capes while the men on ceremonial occasions and in winter wore a rectangular robe of woven fiber. Hats were made of spruce root and cedar bark covers. While A. L. Kroeber says⁵ 'The wearing of hats, as contrasted with head ornaments is Asiatic and un-American except in a region centering in the North west Coast, and therefore significant of connection'. I believe that such a conclusion is not vital as it is the instinct of all humans to protect the head and in a land where it rains and rains and rarely a day passes but that it rains at sometime, the people would have to be exceedingly artless to not seek protection from this constant bombardment.

In addition to manufactures already mentioned let it be said that nettie fibre was gathered from the thick inland jungle growth and made into a twine which was woven into nets; the inner bark of the cedar was woven into bags, pouches, belts, capes and blankets; timber stocksides, bows, heavy spears, flat paddle-shaped clubs, wooden neck pieces were used, armoured waist caps were made with rods or slats of wood arranged vertically and laced close together.

In addition to these many uses, the tender tree shoots and bark also provided food.

For these people who lived close under the stars, the day of cleverness and utilization in woodworking is over. The white man, like a crude monster has ravaged the forests and left in his wake a ghostland of hideous stumps. The death of the timberlands has given way for the

birth of erosion, as there are no longer roots to drink and hold the moisture. The mountainside fir and cedar, that once pillowed the valleys in warmth, is gone and with it the protection from winter cold and snow. Now, the white lumber barons, having devastated the stands of virgin timber and second growth as well, are lobbying for the release of timberlands enclosed by National Parks. The question might arise (to return to Page 1, Paragraph 2) as to whether or not the white man with his superior methods has made better use of this resource than the Indian did. It is true that the Indian failed in not making ^{guns} guns, on mass production lines, to kill his fellow man with; also, he should have concocted out of the warm, wet winds a hydrogen bomb with which to blow up the world --- with these two accomplishments to his credit, by today's standards, he would have made the ultimate use of his resources.

* It is believed that Coast Salish alone exceeded 15,000 when Captain Cook explored the NW Coast in 1778. By 1930 their number had declined to 4,000.

we Red cedar does not grow North of 57degrees North latitude running out in the vicinity of Wrangell and Sitka, so that it is at times necessary to import it if needed for a canoe, etc..⁶

see This same method is used today in N.W. plywood plants.

1 G.W.Sproat - Scenes and Studies of Savage Life

2 D.Jennens - Indians of Canada

3 Habitat, Economy and Society - D. Forde

4 Goddard - Indians of the N. W. Coast

5 A.L.Kroeber - American Culture of the N. W. Coast

6 H. Olson - Adze, Canoe and House Types of the N. W. Coast.