

Trail: Out to Myrtle Bay, across the Bella Coola

In no group of Indians in the United States is there such an inseparable mingling of mythology in art in the everyday lives of the people, as can be found among the tribes of the Northwest Coast, of which the Bella Coola is a member.

From the early days of life² when an ancestral name is given, until death comes, when a totem pole or grave post may be erected, each day has been filled with acts and sounds of spiritual connotation; each day the eyes have gazed on myths carved in alder and cedar. The Bella Coola who live on the misty ocean front at the foothills of mighty snow-capped peaks have atmosphere that conjures up the presence of supernatural beings with facility. The Bella Coola believe that these beings abound in the mountains and forests, that they govern every activity of human life; they include monsters of the imagination as well as birds, animals and fish; sometimes even the activities of the human mind are considered in the realm of the supernatural. Ancient stories telling of strange beings, conversations between men and animals are accepted as truthful accounts, so that it seems obvious to the Bella Coola that the ancestors had greater medicine than today's members.

These supernatural beings, which were represented symbolically on totem poles³ were not objects of worship,⁴ as the Bella Coola scarcely knew any form of worship, but the poles and symbols thereon were held sacred for their family myth implications.

Altho carving itself is an ancient custom among these people, the erection of totem poles is not. The first known carvings of any similarity were in house-front and house-corner posts that were seen standing in 1780. Sometime after this, totem poles were used, and by 1830⁵ they had attained great fashion as a way of displaying one's own power and crests, at the same time commemorating the dead. These memorials were symbols of social standing, achievement and the outstanding symbol of identity and rank; the greater the rank the higher the pole and the more elaborately decorated. Most Bella Coola poles were only about 15 to 20 feet in height, although many families had prerogatives entitling them to construct lofty poles.

*Believed to be a 7 foot one. As on the pages too
This was the original form.*

such as used by the Haida, such poles however, were never common.

Taking into account the great material obstacles present, the achievements, of the Bella Coola and their neighbors, have been tremendous. In the beginning they were provided only with tools of stone and untempered copper, yet they built graceful canoes, made water tight boxes, heaved planks from mighty cedars and erected large houses which called for considerable engineering skill.⁴

Two aspects of esthetic emotion: the pleasure of creating,⁴ the joy in the contemplation of beautiful forms were subjugated, as the object was primarily to tell a story in wood as graphically as possible and reveal the intrinsic character of things.

Wood, the most versatile of all materials used by primitive man is at the same time a limiting material in that objects carved from it are subject to the dimensions of the tree itself.⁴ However, in this plastic art, as employed by the Bella Coola, a more happy medium for expression could not have been found elsewhere: the carving of creatures and spirits, one on the other, that peer through the ocean mists speaking of days of great power, are in positional harmony with the Bella Coola belief in the five worlds, one above the other; the middle one being our own world Earth. In Bella Coola art, the ideal is to represent completely the ancestral symbol or animal; that is, with both sides of an animal in profile, internal as well as external, if possible;⁴ for this purpose, carving in the round in wood is ideal. There is unity, rhythm and balance in these carvings which taper-----expand often with wings and finally practically diminish at the apex.

The carver of the totem pole was generally of the same ancestral family as that of the deceased¹ whose memory was to be honored. If the family contained no carver of particular talent, one would be obtained elsewhere, with the appointed ancestral relative "standing over him" and taking the credit for the carving as well. These carvers sought inspiration in nature while keeping within the bounds of ancient stylistic technique. A combination of realism and decorative treatment, strong facial expression and the amusing contortions which are characteristic of the race,⁴ along with effective

realism found in the treatment of bird, spirit-monsters and the human figure. The carver listens to his instincts, thereby freely expressing himself in terms that belong to his people as a whole. As the Bella Coola feel strongly that a child is born into the companionship of its deceased relatives back to the beginning of time, ~~and~~ the carver calls up the greatest power known --- that of all previous ancestors to watch over his labour and inspire him that his work may be worthy of them.

The arts themselves were created by supernatural beings: The Bella Coola say when carving a design, that Masmalanix gives them the idea which they are working out. Masmalanix is a collective name for the four brothers of Senx who carry out the thoughts of Senx. The brothers live in an elevated room in the House of Myths and are engaged in carving and painting. It is said that they taught men to build canoes, to make boxes, to build houses, ~~and~~ to carve in wood and also to paint.² Spixpiknes, the daughter of Senx invented the art of working cedar. Her figure is used in the Kusiut ceremonial in which the invention of the preparation of cedar-bark is represented.² Raven sent down to the Earth by Senx also invented certain arts, one of which is the salmon-trap used in connection with the salmon-weir; also, the whistle for winter ceremonials is credited to the inventiveness of Raven.²

Masks used in the ceremonials, ~~as~~ Kusiut, etc., are made of Alder and Birch. The carpenters endeavour to follow well-recognized designs for many representations, but a carpenter will receive greater praise for turning out a fine mask of a new design rather than for rigid adherence to a former type.¹ In carving these masks, the attempt is made to record not only the spirit represented, but even more, the feeling of mystery, fear and amazement engendered by the thoughts and deeds of the supernatural one.² These masks were used in the ceremonial dances which took place within large houses only partially illuminated by a flickering central fire, which facilitated deception and conjuring tricks. The masks represent the divinities, as in the case of Selats, who lives in the ocean and twice daily swallows the water of the sea and gives it forth again, causing the tides. A mask representing this being appears in the Kusiut ceremonial

where he is shown as a human being, the face of which is painted with white stripes which symbolize the various levels of the sea.¹

The very paint² used in decorating the body and for portraying designs on wood, was obtained from a kind of rock found near the head of a creek entering the Bella Coola from the South near Skirt. Fragments of the red stone were boiled with hot rocks which action pulverized the fragments and ~~the~~^{the} were then mixed with cedar-bark and salmon roe that had been chewed.³ The red coloring of this paint was in evidence at weddings where heralds smeared their faces with it and guests similarly tinted themselves. For such occasions collars, wristlets and anklets of undyed cedar bark were worn with sacred eagle-down.¹ When a person has died his face is painted with the red paint, his body fastened onto the lower branches of a tree or placed in a little house,¹ which is set on posts, above the level of the ground. His masks are burnt. His crest is carved on a memorial column which also shows how many canoes, coppers, headdresses and slaves he has given away at potlatches.²

The Bella Coola were as avid in their portrayals of myths in song and dance² as they were in carvings. As new songs were required every year, the ceremonial singers frequently made use of fragments of old tunes or snatches from half-forgotten songs, but they were ridiculed as inefficient if the plagiarism was too obvious.³ These tunes were rehearsed long in advance. Words were put to the tunes consisting of bits from the ancestral myth of the person for whom it had been prepared, or from some other theme appropriate to the occasion. The words, however, were not considered to be as important² as the tune, for the words were known to come from the head and heart... while the tune was perhaps the result of spiritual visitation.³

In speaking of the art of a people many objects must be encompassed by the term: true functional art is found in finely turned bows and obsidian tipped arrows, slings, maple and birch slate or armour, moose hide shields, as used by warriors; salmon weirs, hooks, canoes, cooking utensils, spoons, and many other household articles. The effect of myths is found even in these objects. . . ~~for~~^{for} the beaver head on the spoon, etc.. It is the stamp of individual men on nature that makes these a true work of art.

There is poetry in a people who believe in the creation myth that the great spirit *Senz* creates the human baby or animal baby, sends it to *Kzakoknos*, who gives it individual features, from where it is taken by the female spirit *Nuokqamaleix* who places it in a cradle and rocks it; when she ceases to rock, the baby is sent down by *Senz* to our world to be born.²

There is great beauty in a people who at leisure tell ancestral tales and illustrate these with impressive string figures of the beings involved.

There is great wisdom in a people who attempt to draw sustenance from the divine properties of Nature, no matter by what name these properties are known.

A people are lost who wear themselves away from and attempt to wear all away from the life-giving elements. These are lost who cannot learn from the mistakes of the past; mistakes made in regard to their own welfare as well as the welfare of others. It is true that these last will destroy themselves and that the weak, pushed out to the unwanted sections of the world, shall inherit the earth.

End

Notes

#1 Bella Coola believe that the carpenters carve out the child to be born in the same way that a hewn craftsman manufactures some complicated object.

#2 In addition the masks from certain ceremonials were burned after being used so that there was a loss of permanent patterns, consequently many Bella Coola experience difficulty in recognizing the portrayed supernatural beings.

#3 These objects are painted or carved on the columns.

#4 At death, carpenters prepare an imitation body usually of rags on a light framework and a wooden representation of the deceased crest. This latter figure comes through the roof and carries aloft, with the hooks in its feet, the imitation corpse. Very often this ancestral symbol is prepared during the lifetime and a close relative is told where it is hidden.

#5 Each singer had his own beating stick, a stout baton about two feet long, which was pounded on the floor in time with his singing. The other musical instrument was the drum which consisted of a box or skin drum as adopted from the Carrier Indians.

#6 It is interesting to dog lovers to note that the Bella Coola handed down names from the first group of dogs owned by the first powerful ancestors and that no two canines can have the same name at the same time.

#7 Kept intact by the Remembrance.

#8 There is no myth in the entire world that is not duplicated among the myths of the Northwest Coast Indians and other Indians of the U.S..⁸

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1 Bella Coola Indians	Mailwaith
2 Mythology of Bella Coola	Ross
3 Totem Poles of British Columbia	Nat'l. Museum of Canada
4 General Anthropology	Barbeau Ross