



# LISTENING TO OUR ANCESTORS

THE ART OF NATIVE LIFE ALONG THE NORTH PACIFIC COAST

*We have lived for hundreds of years surrounded by other nations. Yet our masks are different, our songs are different, our stories are different. These things were given to us at the beginning of time, and they have helped keep our culture alive.*

—Harvey Mack, Alvin Mack, Grace Hans, Lillian Siwallace, and Eva Mack (Nuxalk)

*Above:*  
Tsimshian *amilik* (mask), early 19th c. 3/4678

*Cover:*  
Kwakwaka'wakw welcome figure (detail), 19th c. 11/5244

Sophisticated in conception and execution, and rich with symbolism, the house posts, masks, dance regalia, and elaborately decorated boxes of the North Pacific Coast have long been recognized as masterworks of art. Less well known are the unique nations whose people made, and continue to make, these beautiful things. Here, in a series of community self-portraits, representatives from eleven Native nations discuss the ways in which these masterpieces, as well as everyday tools and utensils from the museum's collections, connect them with their forebears and enrich their world today.

The range of subjects the community curators discuss encompasses the rhythms of everyday life among the Coast Salish; the significance of whaling to the Makah; the four worlds of Nuu-chah-nulth cosmology; the sacredness and ceremony of Kwakwaka'wakw life; the Heiltsuk Winter Ceremonial cycle; cultural revival among the Nuxalk; the spiritual unity of the Tsimshian world; Nisga'a survival and the reclamation of ancestral fisheries; concepts of wisdom and healing among the Gitksan; Haida singing and dance; and the marvelous wealth of the Tlingit. After being on view in New York, a core collection of objects will travel to each of the eleven communities. The pieces shown here were chosen to speak both to museum visitors and to the people back home, whose ancestors made them.

*Listening to Our Ancestors: The Art of Native Life along the North Pacific Coast* is on view at the Heye Center through July 20, 2008.

## Fall Program Highlights

For an up-to-date listing of public programs throughout the year, please check the NMAI Calendar of Events at [www.AmericanIndian.si.edu](http://www.AmericanIndian.si.edu)

### CultureFest 2007

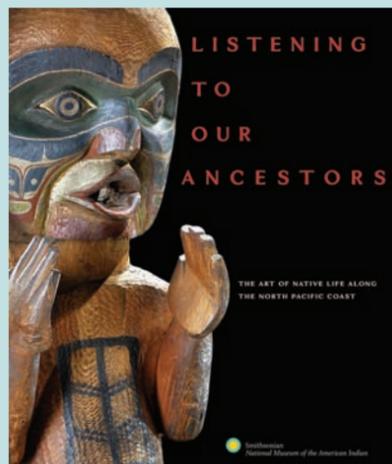
October 13 & 14  
11 a.m. to 5 p.m.  
Battery Park  
Performing in the Heye Center Rotunda at 12, 2, and 4 p.m. will be the *Git-Hoan Dancers* (Tsimshian), led by David Boxley. *Git-Hoan* means "People of the Salmon" in Tsimshian.

### Red Sky Performance

*Raven Stole the Sun*  
November 17, 2 p.m.  
Diker Pavilion, Heye Center  
A creature of impulse and curiosity, Raven creates a brilliant plan to steal the stars, moon, and sun. This dance theatre presentation for children and adults puts a contemporary spin on a traditional Tlingit story.

### Holiday Art Market 2007

December 8 & 9  
10 a.m. to 5 p.m.  
Heye Center  
More than 36 Native artists from throughout the Americas—including several from the communities of the North Pacific Coast—will offer their work for sale.



*Listening to Our Ancestors: The Art of Native Life along the North Pacific Coast*, published by NMAI in association with National Geographic Books, is available in the NMAI shops and other bookstores, or online at [www.AmericanIndian.si.edu](http://www.AmericanIndian.si.edu).



Object photos by Ernest Amoroso and Walter Larrimore  
Landscape photos by Cynthia Frankenburg and Roger Whiteside

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For recorded information about exhibitions, museum programs, and services, call 212-514-3888.

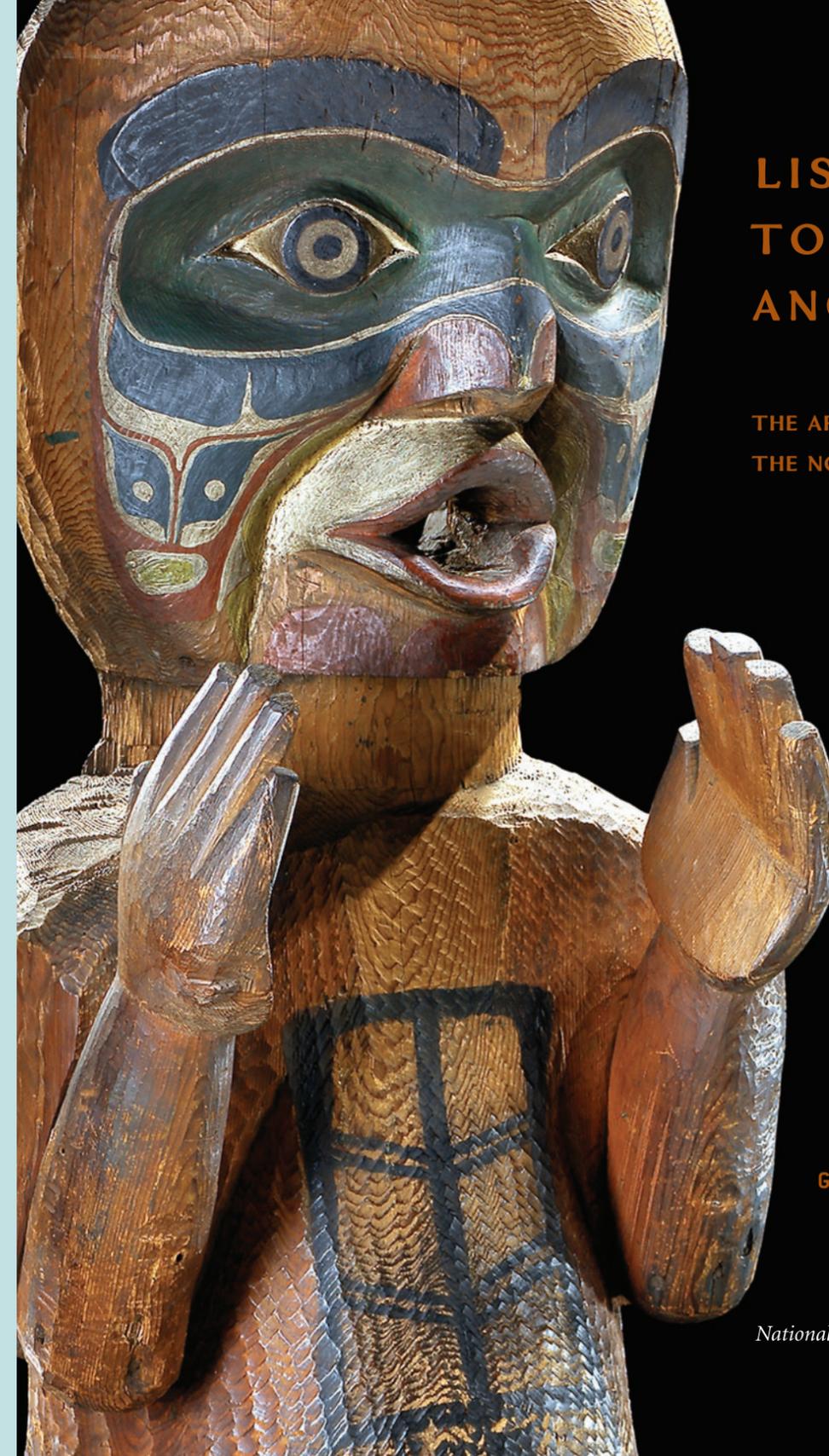
Heye Center hours: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. every day, except December 25. Thursdays to 8 p.m. Admission: free. The museum is fully accessible.

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George Gustav Heye Center

Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian



Our tribes, known by ancient, magical names, have lived on these lands for more than 10,000 years, protected by natural barriers of ocean and mountains. In this beautiful place, our ancestors crafted elaborate institutions and structures of rights and responsibilities based on kinship and history.

—Chief Robert Joseph (Kwakwaka'wakw)



Gatgyet, literally “the strength of the people,” arises from a lineage’s history and place in the world. In ancient times, when an ancestor first acquired a territory, a cane was sometimes touched to the ground to signify the power of the lineage merging with that of the land.

—Lindsey Martin, Susan Marsden, and William White (Tsimshian)

We are q’idičča? a’tx, knowledgeable people with respect for ceremony, gracious hosts, people who honor invitations, generous with food. We are rich by measure of how much we give, not by what we gain.

—Maria Pascua, Janine Bowe chop, Rebekah Monette, and Meredith Parker (Makah)



## The North Pacific Coast

THE LANDS, ISLANDS, AND WATERWAYS from the Olympic Peninsula and Puget Sound in the south to the Gulf of Alaska in the north, and west to the peaks and glaciers of the Coast Mountains, provide a wealth of resources. Particularly important are red and yellow cedar, which can be split into fibers and woven into cloth, as well as carved and painted; salmon, which can be dried, canned, or, more recently, frozen, for use year-round; and oil made from the oolichan—the first fish to return to the northern rivers in the spring—a delicacy and valuable trade good.

**Above:** Nuxalk *szyuh* (kusiut mask in the form of a Thunder figure), ca. 1880. 19/838

**Right, from top:** Cowichan Coast Salish spindle whorl with design suggesting a school of salmon, early to mid 19th c. 15/8959

**Tlingit dance collar,** ca. 1900. 21/859

**Haida hat with crest representing a Dogfish,** ca. 1890. Made by Isabella Edenshaw; painted by Charles Edenshaw. 9/8015



**HISTORY** Detailed narratives, formally recited at feasts, trace the presence of lineages, clans, villages, and houses on the land back more than a hundred generations. The number and diversity of Native languages in the region also speaks to the long history of settlement. Commerce with ships from Europe and Russia, and east across the mountains to Montana, is reflected in Chinook trading jargon, whose dialects were the shared language along the coast in the 1800s and early 1900s.

With Contact came epidemics, as well as the appropriation of Native property by non-Natives. Smallpox, influenza, and other diseases against which the people of the region had no immunity reduced the Native population of the North Pacific Coast from an estimated 185,000 in 1770 to fewer than 35,000 in 1870. The recovery of these nations, their dedication to the preservation of their cultural inheritance, and their assertion of treaty and territorial rights for future generations testify to the strength of their identity as sovereign peoples.



**Left:** Makah model canoe and figures, ca. 1900. Made by Young Doctor. 6/8874



**FEASTS** Perhaps the best-known tradition of the North Pacific Coast is the potlatch. The very word “potlatch”—a Chinook jargon catchall used to describe many different feasts—suggests the difficulty in summarizing the region’s elaborate ceremonies. In the complex political and ceremonial life along the coast, feasts were, among other things, a way communities governed themselves and maintained civility with their neighbors. By reciting histories, chiefs stated their houses’ rights and honors; guests signaled their consent by accepting the host’s gifts. The host’s standing was raised by his generosity, and wealth was shared among the larger community.

In the late 19th and first half of the 20th century—to control and, ostensibly, bring progress to Native communities—American and Canadian government and church officials tried to undermine the foundation of tribal life by banning feasts and other ceremonies. That they did not succeed is shown by the vitality of the communities representing themselves here. Proprietary crests, names, dances, and songs continue to be treasured along the North Pacific Coast. And potlatches, once hosted only by chiefs, today are given by many families, for age-old reasons, like celebrating a birth or marriage, and to honor modern-day achievements, such as a earning a graduate degree.

**From top to bottom:** Nuu-chah-nulth hat belonging to a woman of high status, not dated. 8068

**Heiltsuk mask worn in the Clam Dance,** ca. 1900. 9/2227

**Gitksan watsx aatii'yasxw** (spirit canoe curing aid), 1870–1900. 3/5017

**Back cover:** Nisga'a ladle with handle representing the head of a crane, 1860–1900. 1/4278