

NW Coastal Native People Art

Vocabulary

MASKS: The masks were the most valuable possessions of the people. Masks were worn for social and religious ceremonies, for secret rituals, for healing the sick, and for driving away the causes for disease. Since these tribes did not have a written language, the masks serve as their history books. Crests worn must be earned handed down, given.

ARTIFACT: An object produced or shaped by human workmanship especially a simple tool, weapon, or ornament of archaeological or historical interest.

BENTWOOD BOX: A handmade box from a single plank of cedar. Three notches are carved into the wood. Hot rocks from a fire are put into a pit (often on a beach). Wet seaweed is put on top. The plank is placed atop that and covered with more wet seaweed. The wood is steamed and when pliable, bent to form a box. The top and bottom are carved and fitted, pegged or tied with roots. It is used to store food, tools, regalia for ceremonies including button blankets, masks, fishing tools, etc.

BUTTON BLANKET: A robe of wool cloth, decorated on the back with a family crest outlined in tiny white buttons of mother-of-pearl.

CLAN: A group of families with one common ancestor (Tsimshian have four major clans: the Eagles, Wolves, Ravens, and Killer Whale).

CREST: An image of an animal adopted by a family or clan and used to decorate an object or article of clothing.

FRONTLET: A carved wooden mask worn over the forehead as a part of a headdress, usually carved in the crest of the wearer.

POTLATCH: A ceremony in which presents are given or exchanged by the host. The ceremony could last for days. The potlatch was the high point of the social life. The person who could give away the most gifts, especially valuable ones, achieved the highest status. Eating, singing, dancing, and story-telling (theatrical performances involving tribal masks and spiritual events) were part of the celebration as well. Potlatches were held for several reasons: the confirmation of a new chief; coming of age; tattooing or piercing ceremonies; initiation into a secret society; divorce; the funeral of a chief; weddings; battle victory. Lower status families would hold potlatches on a local scale while the elite would invite guests from many tribes to

grandeur events. Sometimes, rival families would be in competition to outdo each other in elaborate potlatches. The potlatch itself would either be held inside a large longhouse or outdoors.

REGALIA: The costumes worn by the native people during their ceremonies.

TOTEM: An animal or object from which a family traces its clan origins.

TOTEM POLE: A tall pole carved from a single log with a design showing several totems stacked one upon the other. Totem poles are made to honor an individual or to tell a legend or story. They may be found outside of or holding up a house, identifying who lives there, the clan.

TRIBE: A group of persons or clans with one common language and living under a leader or chief.

TRICKSTER: A character or person who delights in playing tricks on others and is skilled at doing so. The raven is a trickster.

ADZE: A tool shaped like an axe. It is used for carving. The handle is made of wood and often carved. The blade is made of steel.