

I.—FACIAL PAINTINGS OF THE INDIANS OF NORTHERN BRITISH COLUMBIA.

By FRANZ BOAS.

PLATES I-VI

The art of the Indians of northern British Columbia shows a peculiar development, that has for a long time attracted the attention of investigators. While among most primitive people we find a tendency to the development of geometric designs, the Indians of northern British Columbia use for decorative purposes almost exclusively animal motives. The animal forms are highly conventionalized, and may be recognized by a number of symbols characteristic of the various animals that the artists try to represent. The Indians have adopted a peculiar method of adapting the animal form to the decorative field. There is no endeavor to represent the form by means of perspective, but the attempt is made to adapt the form as nearly as possible to the decorative field by means of distortion and dissection. The more clever an artist is in designing methods of distortion and dissection which fill the decorative field and bring into view all the important parts of the animal body, the greater is his success.¹ It will be seen, therefore, that the greater the difference between the form of the decorative field and the form of the animal to be represented, the greater will be the difficulty of adaptation. When an animal is to be represented on a bracelet, it is shown as though it were cut from head to tail, and as though the arm were pushed through the opening, the whole animal thus surrounding the wrist. The same method is followed in the decoration of dishes, where the sides of the animal are shown on the sides of the dish, while the opening of the dish represents the back of the animal, its bottom the lower side of the animal. When the animal form is to be shown on flat surfaces, the body is generally represented as split in two, and spread in both directions, so that it appears like two profiles placed side by side.

The peculiarities of the conventionalism of these tribes appear most clearly where the difficulty of adaptation of the subject to the decorative field is greatest. I concluded, therefore, that if I could obtain a series of representations on very difficult surfaces, the principles of conventionalism would appear most clearly. No surface seems to be more difficult to treat.

¹ I have explained in another place the fundamental ideas underlying this art (Bulletin of the American Museum of Natural History, 1897, pp. 123-170).