

Article X.—THE DECORATIVE ART OF THE INDIANS
OF THE NORTH PACIFIC COAST.

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It has been shown that the motives of the decorative art of many peoples developed largely from representations of animals. In course of time, forms that were originally realistic became more and more sketchy, and more and more distorted. Details, even large portions, of the subject so represented, were omitted, until finally the design attained a purely geometric character.

The decorative art of the Indians of the North Pacific Coast agrees with this oft-observed phenomenon in that its subjects are almost exclusively animals. It differs from other arts in that the process of conventionalizing has not led to the development of geometric designs, but that the parts of the animal body may still be recognized as such. The body of the animal, however, undergoes very fundamental changes in the arrangement and size of its parts. In the following paper I shall describe the characteristics of these changes, and discuss the mental attitude of the artist which led to their development.

In treating this subject, we must bear in mind that almost all the plastic art of the Indians of the North Pacific Coast is decorative art. While some primitive people—for instance, the Eskimo—produce carvings which serve no practical ends, but are purely works of art, all the works of the Indian artists of the region which we are considering serve at the same time a useful end; that is to say, the form of the object is given, and the subject to be represented is more or less subordinate to the object on which it is shown. Only in the cases of single totemic figures is the artist free to mould his subject without regard to such considerations; but, owing to the large size of such figures, he is limited by the cylindrical form of the trunk of the tree from which he carves his figures. We may therefore say that the native artist is in almost all his works limited by the shape of the object on which he represents his subject.