

Art and the native peoples

Totem poles were the first Amerindian sculptures considered to be works of art. Their "discovery" dates from the first half of the nineteenth century, although totemic art had been practised long before then. The art flourished until about 1880, when it went into decline. The sometimes destructive influence of missionaries contributed to this decline, as did legislation forbidding certain rituals such as the "potlatch". The work of ethnologist Marius Barbeau (1883-1969) did much to inspire renewed interest.

The origins of Inuit (Eskimo) art are little known, although the Inuit have been carving small objects from soapstone (and seal tusks and whalebone) for generations. The general public first became aware of Inuit art through a remarkable exhibition in Montreal in 1949 organized by the Canadian Handicrafts Guild and by the artist James Houston. This exposure, first to a Canadian and then to an international audience, brought new influences (such as print-making) to bear on the Inuit.

