

BACKGROUND PAPER

This major exhibition which will open in Paris on Tuesday, March 25, will be on exhibit there until September and will come back to Canada to be shown at the National Gallery from November 21 to January 11, 1970. All the items shown were borrowed from Canadian Institutions through the good offices of Dr. William E. Taylor, Director of the National Museum of Man in Ottawa, who also contributed to the bilingual catalogue, illustrating every item. This catalogue has been published by La Société des Amis du Musée de l'Homme in Paris. The Department of External Affairs contributed administratively to the organization of the exhibition through its Cultural Affairs Division in Ottawa and its Embassy in Paris. The Department also has borne most of the financial costs of the exhibition providing funds for a total of \$65,000 out of its cultural exchanges budget.

"This will be an event of major importance for Canadian Indian and Eskimo art," said Dr. Taylor. "While this art, particularly that of the Northwest Coast Indians, is widely represented in museums around the world, this is the first time it is being exhibited on an international scale."

Pre-historic Eskimos and the Northwest Coast Indians have the largest representation, as these two groups were artistically the most active and sophisticated. The oldest piece is an Eskimo ivory mask, dated at 700 B.C. by radio-carbon; it was found at Hudson Strait by Dr. Taylor in 1958. Dr. Taylor writes in the catalogue that the Dorset Eskimos produced some of the best Arctic work: "Hardly primitive, it is rather an aboriginal art reflecting a long heritage of development and is inextricably fused to religion." This art is marked by a fine sense of craft and painstaking finish, in contrast to that of the later Thule culture which was seldom so well finished.

The art-obsessed people of the Northwest Coast have produced enormous quantities of work, particularly since the 18th century, which has enriched museums around the world. Dr. Taylor considers that the Dorset Eskimos were probably the most productive of all primitive artists. Wilson Duff, Associate Professor of Anthropology, University of British Columbia, writes for the catalogue that this prodigious flow was probably in response to religious and social impulses. "The religious art may be seen as an attempt to make visible and tangible the supernatural beings of the universe, so that man's relations to them could be dramatized in ritual." For instance, at the winter dancing societies, persons wearing monstrous masks and costumes appeared from behind painted screens and impersonated supernatural beings. These rituals called for an endless array of masks, costumes and puppets, particularly