

Exhibitions at Canada

The Canada House Galleries in Trafalgar Square are currently mounting several exhibitions to complement *Living Arctic*, the exhibition on Canadian Indian and Inuit life currently showing at the Museum of Mankind.

The Main Gallery at Canada House is showing twenty five historical and contemporary masks from the Pacific Northwest Coast, entitled *I have seen the other side of the world*. The masks have been borrowed from the Museum of Anthropology of the University of British Columbia, Vancouver. This is the first time that such an important group of Indian artefacts from the world-renowned collection of the museum has been shown in Europe. The exhibition runs from December 4, 1987 to March 4, 1988.

I Have Seen the Other Side of the World

The tradition of mask making extends along the entire Northwest Coast area, from northern Washington State through British Columbia to the Alaskan panhandle. The masks vary in size, shape, complexity and purpose from one tribal group to another. The tribal origin of most masks can be readily distinguished by the characteristic features that define cultural styles.

Winter dance ceremonies have their most elaborate expression among the Southern Kwagiutl people. Bold carving, exaggerated features and colourful surface painting give Kwagiutl masks a stunning theatrical effect. The great masks of the cannibal birds, used in the important Hamatsa dance, are unsurpassed in dramatic power, with their huge clapping beaks, shredded cedar bark hair and penetrating eyes.

Among the West Coast (Nootka) people, head-dresses and masks representing supernatural wolves

'Bookwus' mask
Beau Dick
collected 1983
Kwagiutl

'Hamatsa' mask
Glen Tallio
collected 1987
Bella Coola



Photo: Bill McLennan - UBC Museum of Anthropology



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and serpents dramatise the capture and return of young dance initiates. The Coast Salish Swaixwe mask, with protruding eyes and stylised tongue, is used in the ritual cleansing of people involved in life changes. And in masks by Haida and Tsimshian carvers, human faces representing ancestors or hereditary names are portrayed with subtle realism.

Carvers today use many of the same materials and techniques that were refined by their ancestors. Red and yellow cedar, alder and yew woods are transformed into masks with the aid of traditional adzes and curved or straight knives. Masks are embellished with cedar bark, human or horse hair, abalone and operculum shells, and paint.

An arts and crafts revival in the Pacific Northwest

The modern masks in this exhibition are evidence of the dramatic revival in Indian art that has been taking place on the Northwest Coast of North America since the 1960s. Today, at least 200 professional native artists and many more craftsmen and women are creating not only masks but silver and gold jewellery, basketry and weaving.

Native art flourished in coastal British Columbia until the late 19th century. But the continuing effects of colonisation on the Indian cultures left artistic and ceremonial traditions in a state of decline. In 1884 an amendment to the Canadian Indian Act prohibited the potlatch, a central institution of native society. Art played a major role in this ceremony, both as gifts and as dance regalia.

With the prohibition of the potlatch, which lasted until 1951, the impetus for artists to master the traditions and pass them on was severely diminished.