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MASTERPIECES OF INDIAN AND ESKIMO ART OF CANADA

The Secretary of State for External Affairs, the Honourable Mitchell Sharp, announced today that a major exhibition "Masterpieces of Indian and Eskimo Art of Canada" will open at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris on March 25. Mr. Gérard Pelletier, Secretary of State, will be in Paris to represent the Canadian Government at this event.

With the assistance of the Department of External Affairs the exhibition was organized by the Société des Amis du Musée de l'Homme in Paris and the National Museum of Man in Ottawa, and presented under the aegis of the Franco-Canadian cultural agreement. It will run until September when it will move to the National Gallery of Canada.

More than 200 sculptures and other items, provided by eleven Canadian museums, will be on display. The collection, the most important of its kind ever assembled, will bring together works selected not only for their great ethnographic and archaeological value but also for their aesthetic qualities and originating from several Canadian regions and recently excavated archaeological sites.

Underlining the exceptional quality of the exhibition, Mr. Sharp expressed his satisfaction that Franco-Canadian relations were being developed in a relatively new field.

... to them could be described as 'ritual.' For ... the winter dancing societies, persons wearing ... and costumes appeared from behind painted screens ...

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

among the Kwakiutl, who developed this form to its highest peak.

Mr. Duff continues, "The social art may be seen as a way of making the social structure visible, by displaying the heraldic crests of kinship groups and proclaiming the special privileges of the chiefs." This form was best expressed by the Haida with their totem poles up to 80 feet in height illustrating their urge for status. A fine totum pole is included in the exhibition, that of Chief Wiah of Masset, Queen Charlotte Islands. The Haida also adorned housefronts, house partitions, canoes, helmets, headdresses, robes, staffs, dishes, boxes, spoons, to mention only some of the items. Family crests called for easy identification, which led to the development of such conventionalized symbols as the beaver's large teeth and scaly tail, the killer whale's spout and dorsal fin. These symbols also became elements in complex designs which were largely decorative. There was also a tendency to invoke magical properties, a wooden fish hook, for instance, carved in the form of a fish-eating duck; a seal club in the form of the killer whale; and a grease dish in that of a seal.

The Haida also developed an abstract style of painting using a small vocabulary of conventionalized symbols, "obsessed with precision of line and perfection of form and composition," according to Mr. Duff. Although essentially a painter's style, it came to be adapted to other techniques such as carving, engraving, appliqué and weaving. Sculpture and flat design were skilfully combined using "beautiful underlying forms and beautifully decorated surfaces, with the lines of the total design moving easily from two dimensions to three and back again".

Hugh A. Dempsey, Technical Director, Glenbow-Alberta Institute, writing of the Plains Indians, notes that designs symbolizing religion or war were usually made by men, while those for clothing, utensils and household objects were done by women. Men painted the religious symbols on the outside of tipis, but the women designed the non-religious linings inside. Men decorated shields, drums and rattles and women painted parfleche bags and carved the handles of scraping and fleshing tools.

Painted robes were made by both women and men, depending on the designs used. Allies were painted red, enemies blue; some figures were represented realistically, such as horses or men; others were abstract, such as scouting parties and scalps. Porcupine quill embroidery, among the most impressive work of these Indians, was done by women. The best quills were taken from the underside of porcupines, dyed, flattened and woven into designs for moccasins, shirts,

leggings and other articles of clothing. Women who did this work were so respected they were believed to have supernatural abilities. Later beading tended to replace porcupine quill work as it was easier to do. While designs seldom could be attributed to specific tribes, each had certain characteristics which commonly appeared in its work: the Blackfoot made frequent use of heavy plain diamonds while the Sioux preferred more complex designs of varying small geometrical forms; Crees sometimes borrowed floral designs from their woodland neighbours, but also used heavy diamond patterns.

The nomadic life of the Plains Indians largely restricted their art to the decoration or design of useful objects.

Eastern Indians are dealt with by Rémi Savard, assistant professor, Université de Montréal.