

An Overview of Pacific Northwest Native Indian Art



By Clint Leung

First Edition 2006

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Brought to you by

Free Spirit Gallery

Exquisite Pacific Northwest Native Indian & Inuit Art Treasures

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Foreword

I had lived in Vancouver very briefly as a child and it was during that time when I was first exposed to the art of the Northwest Coast Native Indians. It was the towering colorful totem poles out in Stanley Park that everyone gazed at with wonder and appreciation. It took about 30 years later during a return trip to Vancouver when Pacific Northwest Native Indian art caught my eyes again.

I was in Vancouver for business and landed at the city's new airport terminal. One could not help but notice the huge native carvings near the arrivals area. Later on during my stay, I decided to wander around in the Gastown district. It was in these shops and galleries in Gastown where I fell in love with Pacific Northwest Native Indian art. I saw many wonderful wooden plaques representing different animals. There were also art prints, paintings, masks, wooden bowls and even furniture with these animals either painted or carved right into the pieces.

The colors and designs, which might be considered a bit exaggerated to non-native eyes, were striking as well as bold. I knew at that time that I wanted to include some of this magnificent artwork on my walls back at home. So I bought two plaque carvings and carried them home like newly found treasure.

Historically, the Native Indians who lived along the river valleys and coastal waters of the Pacific Northwest were all hunters and gatherers. The region was blessed with abundant resources from both the seas and forests. These people captured in their artwork the animals they hunted and observed. These included bears, killer whales, eagles, ravens, salmons, wolves, hummingbirds and even frogs. Chiefs and mythical characters important in their legends such as thunderbirds were also included as art subjects.

Pacific Northwest Native Indian art is just only recently gaining some major attention in some galleries and museums around the world. Compared to other native arts such as Inuit (Eskimo), exposure of Pacific Northwest Native Indian art is still rather limited to the northwest coast of Canada and the United States. This form of artwork is virtually unknown to most parts of the world including many regions of North America. This will hopefully change as more people from around the world travel to Vancouver. The future winter Olympics in 2010 up in Whistler, BC will also have a positive impact on the region's aboriginal art. I personally believe that Pacific Northwest Native Indian art has a lot of potential to be internationally recognized and accepted.

This eBook will hopefully give the reader a good overview of what Pacific Northwest Native Indian art is all about as well as what makes it so distinctive from other aboriginal arts. I hope to help the extremely talented Pacific Northwest Native Indian artists get more international exposure for their work with this eBook as well as through the Free Spirit Gallery website (<http://www.FreeSpiritGallery.ca>). After all, it would be a real shame if they had to stop doing their art in order to take up other jobs just to make ends meet.

Clint Leung

The Basic Elements of Pacific Northwest Native Indian Art

Pacific Northwest Native Indian art is so distinct from other styles of Native American art that most neophyte admirers can probably easily spot a piece of aboriginal artwork that came from the Northwest out of a crowd containing other native arts. The interesting thing is that they don't have to really understand why Pacific Northwest Native Indian art is so easy to distinguish in order to do this. There's something unique and characteristic about the Northwest Indian styles that set them apart.

The next few chapters will look into Pacific Northwest Native Indian art on a deeper level and illustrate some of its basic elements in order to give a better appreciation of this striking form of art. Separate chapters explore different aspects of Pacific Northwest Native Indian art including the colors, shapes and designs used.



Pacific Northwest Native Indian Art
Painting of Four Killer Whales
by Alex Underwood

The Colors of Pacific Northwest Native Indian Art

The main traditional colors of Pacific Northwest Native Indian art are black and red. Black is the primary color used in the formline which is the outline for the body of the subject. The formline is discussed further in the chapter about the shapes of Pacific Northwest Native Indian art.

Although Native artists use commercial paint these days, black color was derived from charcoal, graphite or lignite coal in the old days. The secondary elements of the subject are usually painted red. Red colors were derived from red ochre and hematite minerals before the days of paint.

Many pieces of Pacific Northwest Native Indian art such as the raven and bear carving below use only these two colors to achieve that characteristic Northwest Native look.



Raven and Bear by Albert Joseph

Of course, many Pacific Northwest Native Indian artists also use additional colors to add final touches to their artwork. A tertiary color often used as a filler is blue-green where the shades can range from pure blue all the way to pure green. This was an influence from the Native Indian artists from the northern regions of the Pacific Northwest. Other colors that are used as tertiary colors include yellow and white.



Bald Eagle by Cody Mathias

Contemporary Pacific Northwest Native Indian artists also occasionally experiment with other colors since they are widely available today as commercial paints. There are also wood carvings that do not use any colors at all resulting in pieces with the stained natural wood look.

In the past, black was painted first, then red and any tertiary colors came last. In many instances, black and red colors were painted on wood before any carving was started since these two colors were usually put on the plane surface of the piece. Any tertiary colors like blue-green, yellow or white were added in after carving. This method was thought to be more practical for some artists. However, most Pacific Northwest Native Indian artists today carve first and paint later. Clear shoe polish or oil is then applied to carvings to give an extra shine to the surfaces.

The Shapes & Form of Pacific Northwest Native Indian Art

With further analysis of Pacific Northwest Native Indian art, it can be realized that the different shapes used by Northwest Native artists in their artwork are what produces the characteristic Northwest look. Each of these main shapes is discussed below with examples shown from authentic artwork.

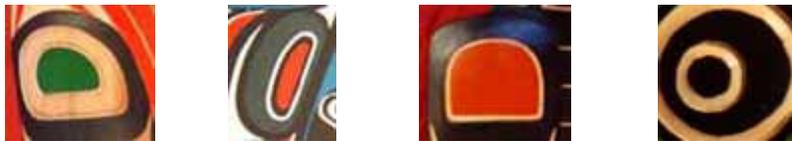
The Formline

The formline of Pacific Northwest Native Indian art is the main line that outlines the body of the subject whether it is a person or animal. Different parts of the subject such as the head, joints and other body parts (arms, legs, wings, etc.) are defined by the formline. The formline is usually black in color but can sometimes be red. The thickness of the formline itself can change at various places and contains all the other shapes used for a subject.

The Ovoid Shape

The ovoid is the most dominant shape in Pacific Northwest Native Indian art. It is like a rounded rectangle with inner tension pushing the top to form a convex, similar to the shape of a bread slice. The lower side is sometimes seen with a concave at the bottom. These oval like shapes vary in size proportions depending on the kind of subject or creature they are used to symbolize but all ovoids have the same common qualities whether they are long and slender or fat and round. Larger ovoids may be used to form the head of a subject, eye sockets, major joints, wings, tails or fins. Smaller ovoids may be used to form joints, eyes, ears, noses or contain faces. Sometimes ovoids are used to help fill empty spaces and corners.

Ovoids can be solid (completely color filled) or open with inside space. Inner ovoids are smaller, usually solid ones that go inside a larger open ovoid. Below are examples of this. The combination can be observed in the formation of eyeballs.



Examples of Ovoid Shapes

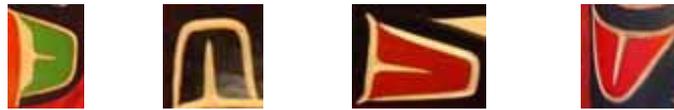
The U-Form Shape

The second most common shape used in Pacific Northwest Native Indian art is the U-form. As the term suggests, they resemble thick letter 'U's with ends tapering to sharp points. Like ovoids, U-forms can vary in proportions but they all have the U shape. Larger U-forms are used to contour the body of the subject and as part of the formline for tails or ears. Smaller U-forms are used as space fillers and even feathers of a bird. Multiple U-forms can also be stacked together to represent tails or fins. Below are examples of Pacific Northwest Native Indian art U-forms.



Examples of U-Forms

A common variation of the U-form is the split U-form. This is where the U-form is split in the middle with the inner U looking more like a 'V' that ends up with a point in the center. Split U-forms can also vary in proportion. They are used in ears, feathers and tails. Northwest Native artists also use split U-forms as space fillers in open spaces. Below are examples of Pacific Northwest Native Indian art split U-forms.



Examples Split U-Forms

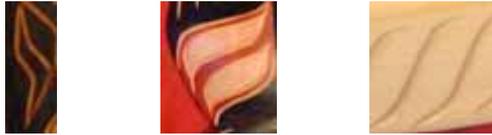
Quite often, U-forms are used in conjunction with ovoids to form the arms, legs, ears and other body parts. The possibilities of what can be portrayed with just this ovoid and U-form shape combination are enormous in the hands of talented Northwest Native artists. Two examples of an ovoid and split U-form combination are below. Notice the one in the right utilizes two split U-forms, one stacked on top of the other.



Examples of U-Form – Ovoid Combinations

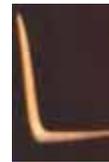
The S-Form Shape

Another shape used by Northwest Native artists is the S-form. This shape is like the letter ‘S’ with tapered ends. It is used as space fillers as well as parts of arms and legs. Multiple S-forms can also form a subject’s ribcage. S-forms are also used to connect different body parts of a subject. Below are examples of S-forms, including multiples.



Examples of S-Forms

The L-form is also a shape used as a space filler as well as a connector. An example of the L-form shape is on the right.



L-Form

Northwest Native artists use these various shapes and the formline to create their intended subjects. As these positive shapes are assembled in close proximity to each other, the spaces between them create negative shapes which also play an important role in the overall design. Good artists know that any changes made to the positive shapes will also affect the negative shapes as well.

As one looks at Pacific Northwest Native Indian art more closely, including the pieces shown throughout this eBook, the different shapes discussed can be recognized. These shapes help give each piece that unique Pacific Northwest Native Indian look.

Pacific Northwest Native Indian Art Animal Design

This chapter looks at the design of various Pacific Northwest Native Indian art animals since native artists focus so much of their subjects on wildlife and mythical creatures.

Most of the time, the entire body of the animal will be outlined by the formline but not always. Sometimes only the head, wing, tail or foot will be shown to represent the animal in a different profile.

The design of an animal's eyes usually consists of the eyeball in an ovoid or circular shape with the eyelid drawn as a fine line around it. This line is tapered to points on opposite ends. Sometimes, the eyelid is drawn as a thicker, tapered shape rather than a line. Both the eyeball and eyelid are usually placed within a larger ovoid that represents the eye socket. Below are examples of different Pacific Northwest Native Indian art eyes. Some artists have also been known to add in eyebrows for both animal and human subjects.



Examples of Pacific Northwest Native Indian Art Eyes

Ears are usually represented as U-forms and sometimes ovoids. The noses of animals can vary greatly from small ovoid nostrils all the way up to large, flaring snouts. The following examples show ears and noses from carvings of bears.



Examples of Ears

Examples of Noses

Tongues can also have a range of form and may be drawn protruding from the animal's mouth or beak. An interesting note is when a raven bird's tongue includes a circular disc, the Northwest Native Indian artist is portraying the bird as the Bringer of the sun, moon or fire.

Extremities such as claws of birds, flippers of killer whales, feet of animals and hands of humans can be a major part of a Pacific Northwest Native Indian art piece. The entire limb such as an arm or leg often includes an ovoid as the main joint connecting to the body. Extremities and their limbs can sometimes be drawn quite minimally by Northwest Native artists. In these cases, the extremities would often be joined to the subject's body via a bent line. This bent line, similar to a hinge, represents the flexed position of the limb. Below are examples of Pacific Northwest Native Indian art limbs. The last photo on the right is an example where the limb is minimalized.



Examples of Leg & Arm

Example of Flipper

Example of Leg

Bird feathers are generally elongated U-forms that may have split U-forms within. Most wings of birds utilize the ovoid and U-form shape combination where the ovoid is the joint and the U-form will have feathers attached to it. Bird tails are often similar with an ovoid serving as the tail joint and multiple feathers extending from it. Below are examples of Pacific Northwest Native Indian art bird parts with feathers.



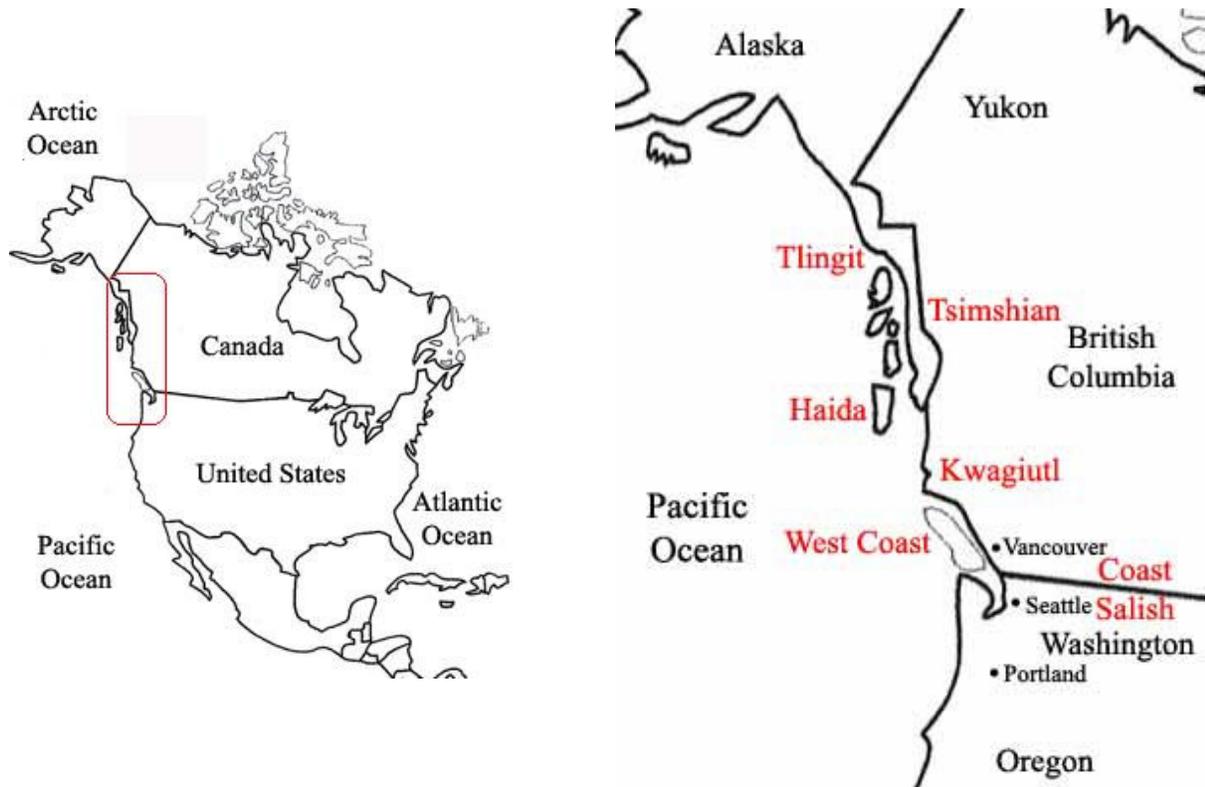
Examples of Wings & Feathers

As we look closer at Pacific Northwest Native Indian art pieces and notice the various basic elements such as colors, shapes used and how the different parts are put together, we get a much greater appreciation of the skills of these native artists. This helps us admire and enjoy this aboriginal art form that much more.

The Region of Pacific Northwest Native Indian Art

Pacific Northwest Native Indian art is based on the cultures of the various groups of native people who have inhabited the Pacific Northwest for generations. There are many tribes and divisions of Northwest Natives but they all fall into six major distinct groups; Tlingit, Tsimshian, Haida, Kwagwiltl, West Coast (Nootka) and Coast Salish.

The geographical region of Northwest Natives starts from the southern parts of Alaska, extends along the Canadian west coast of British Columbia including Vancouver Island and goes down as far as the northern parts of Oregon state. The maps below show this geographical region where Pacific Northwest Native Indian art comes from. The first map on the left shows where the entire region is in relation to the North American continent while the map on the right displays the same region in greater detail. The six major groups of Northwest Natives are also shown in the second map.



Most of the Pacific Northwest Native Indian art shown in this eBook is from the Squamish Nation which is part of the Coast Salish group.

Pacific Northwest Native Indian Totem Poles

Whenever visitors travel in and around the Pacific coastlines of the US states of Washington, Oregon and the Canadian province of British Columbia, they will likely see totem poles. One of the main attractions at Vancouver's Stanley Park is its collection of totem poles. There are also totem poles and other Pacific Northwest Native Indian art on display at the Vancouver International Airport.



Pacific Northwest Native Indian Totem Poles at Vancouver's Stanley Park

The totems had multiple Northwest Native figures carved on tall, western cedar poles. It was intended to have each figure represent a meaning and overall, a totem pole told a real or mythical story. Sometimes the figures also represented a Northwest Native family's crest or coat of arms recording their family history.

The Kwakwak'wakw and Nuu-cha-nulth tribes made totem poles as giant human welcome figures. The Coast Salish people in southern BC and western Washington state carved large human figures on poles to represent ancestors and spirit helpers. Memorial poles were often placed on front of houses in honor of deceased chiefs. There were also mortuary poles made in the nineteenth century which housed at the top, the remains of important individuals. In addition to free standing totem poles, there were also poles at the front of houses which also served as doorways. Poles decorated with Pacific Northwest Native Indian art were also made inside houses to support roof beams.

The first Northwest Coast Native tribes who made totems were the Haida, Tlingit and Tsimshian in BC as well as southeast Alaska in the early 1800's (see previous chapter). Their use spread to other tribes in the Northwest coast region over the years. There were ceremonies referred to as potlatches whenever new totem poles were raised. However, these potlatches were made illegal in Canada during the late 1800's. As a result, most Northwest Native tribes stopped making totem poles but still carved small models of poles for tourists. This anti-potlatch law was dropped in 1951 and the Northwest Native people resumed carving totem poles again.



Close Up of Totem Poles

Totem poles have become one of the key symbols for the Northwest Native people. Totem poles have been specially commissioned in recent times and erected in both public locations as well as for private Pacific Northwest Native Indian art collections around the world. Foreign locations have included Japan and Germany. Totem poles made in BC have also been installed in some Canadian embassies abroad to represent one of the cultural icons of Canada.

Pacific Northwest Native Indian Tribal Masks

Masks have played important roles in many aboriginal tribal cultures around the world. Some of the most colorful and striking tribal masks come from Pacific Northwest Native Indian art by the Northwest Native people.

Types of Pacific Northwest Native Indian Masks

Pacific Northwest Native Indian masks depict many different humans and animals including mythical creatures from Northwest Native legends. Some masks were portrait masks where they were made to portray specific persons. Animal masks had special meaning for certain clans since all members of a tribe were supposedly descended from specific animals. From a structural point of view, there are generally three different types of masks. The single face mask is the simplest of the three and is carved from a single piece of red cedar wood. The second type is a mechanical mask with movable parts. This type of mask was actually developed after Europeans introduced the Northwest Natives to strings and hinges. The Northwest Natives then utilized this European technology to enable eyes and mouths of masks to open and close. The third type of Pacific Northwest Native Indian mask is the transformation mask which is also the most complex one. This type has an outer mask that can open up to reveal an inner second mask form. Sometimes this inner mask form can even open up to reveal a third mask form.

Obviously, having multiple layers result in more weight in the mask requiring a strong person to wear it. One example of a transformation mask was a salmon as the outer mask which opened up to reveal the salmon bringer inside. The salmon bringer was a character which was said to go down to the bottom of the sea in an underwater canoe to bring the salmon fish up to the rivers. The Kwagiutl people used transformation masks of animals which opened up to reveal ancestor mask forms inside. These particular masks were used to tell stories of ancestral origins.

The carver must account for shrinkage and warping when sizing up masks. Although the majority of Northwest Native masks are made to fit a person's face, not all masks were made with this intention. Masks also come in miniature sizes as well as giant sized versions like the ones on display at Vancouver's airport. Mask making is one of the more advanced projects in Pacific Northwest Native Indian art and therefore only experienced carvers make them. As with other works of this aboriginal art genre, traditional forms and colors were used on masks (see Basic Elements of Pacific Northwest Native Indian Art). In addition to painting, many masks had other materials such as hair, feathers, gold, straw and skin added in order to enhance the pieces or make them more realistic looking.



Undersea World King
by Wade Baker

The Function of Pacific Northwest Native Indian Masks

Pacific Northwest Native Indian masks were made for use in ceremonies and rituals. One such ceremony was the potlatch which was a festival that involved a chief of one tribe giving gifts to a chief from another tribe. Tribal chiefs wanted to show off their wealth by giving the best gifts. People from both tribes at a potlatch ceremony would feast, watch the giving of gifts and enjoy the ceremonial dances. Specially trained dancers would wear the masks and act out stories or legends. An interesting fact is that in many cases, the women and children were not allowed to know the actual meanings of either the masks or the stories being acted out. They were just allowed to watch and enjoy the performances as entertainment. Masks were also used in secret society rituals for shamanism, war, conjuring and inducting young members into a tribe. These rituals were often restricted to certain members of the tribe only.



Wild Woman Mask by Cody Mathias



Mask by Cedric Billy

Today, masks are still used in ceremonies including performances by Northwest Native groups for non-Natives and tourists. One can see these masks in some museums and galleries that exhibit Pacific Northwest Native Indian art. Masks are some of the most sought after items by collectors as a striking and colorful mask definitely makes a very interesting piece of home decor. Some more examples of masks can be found at <http://www.FreeSpiritGallery.ca/masks.htm>.

The Thunderbird in Pacific Northwest Native Indian Art

The thunderbird has been one of the most dominant icons in Native American art and legends. In fact, the concept of the thunderbird has been so popular that it has been used in the non-Native world to name a classic automobile, liquor, a 1960's children's adventure television show (and subsequent recent movie), a US Air Force squadron and is referenced in pop music (remember the word 't-bird' in 1950's rock and roll?). The thunderbird is one of the few cross-cultural characters in Native American mythology since it is found in legends of Pacific Northwest, Plains, and Northeastern tribes.

The Native Indians of the Pacific Northwest Coast always lived along the shores and never ventured inland to the mountains. Legend has it that the thunderbird, a mighty God in the form of a giant, supernatural bird lives in the mountains. The Quileute tribe of Washington state considered a cave on Mount Olympus as the home of the thunderbird while the Coast Salish believed it is located on the Black Tusk peak in British Columbia. It is thought that the thunderbird never wants anyone to come near its home. If Native hunters get too close, the thunderbird will smell them and make a thunder sound by flapping its wings. It would also roll ice out of its cave and down the mountain with chunks breaking up into many smaller pieces.



Thunderbird by Gary Baker



Thunderbird with Killer Whale
by Charles August

Some tribes such as the Kwakwaka'wakw believe that their people once made a deal with the thunderbird for its help during a food crisis and in return, the tribe agreed to honor the thunderbird for all time by making its image prominent in their Pacific Northwest Native Indian art. This is why Northwest Native totem poles are often carved with thunderbirds with outstretched wings at the top.

The wingspan of the thunderbird was described to be twice as long as a Native Indian war canoe. Underneath its wings are lightning snakes which the thunderbird uses as weapons. Lightning is created when the thunderbird throws these lightning snakes or when he blinks his eyes that glow like fire. Sometimes these lightning snakes are depicted in Native American art as having wolf or dog-like heads with serpent tongues. They are occasionally referred to as the thunderbird's dogs. Native American art portrays the thunderbird with a huge curving beak and prominent ears or horns.

The thunderbird is large and strong enough to hunt its favorite food which is the killer whale. The lightning snakes of the thunderbird are used during hunts out at sea for the killer whale. After capture, the thunderbird carries the killer whale back to the mountain to eat. According to legend, the thunderbird and killer whale once battled so hard that entire trees were uprooted. This was the explanation why there are treeless prairie regions near the Pacific Northwest Coast mountains. The thunderbird and killer whale are often depicted together in Pacific Northwest Native Indian art. A large example is at one by renowned carver Richard Hunt at one of the art exhibits at the Vancouver International Airport.

The Squamish Nation in British Columbia, Canada has a thunderbird as their symbol. Their thunderbird is portrayed as one of the special messengers of the Creator. The Squamish thunderbird is a symbol for strength as well as change with the three tail feathers representing the past, present and future. In the talons of this thunderbird is a face of a lizard which represents spiritual protection for the people of the Squamish Nation.



Thunderbird by Cody Mathias



Squamish Nation's Thunderbird

For many people, Natives and non-Natives alike, the thunderbird has become a symbol of power, strength and nobility. Even the classic automobile of the same name was reintroduced as a contemporary version. See thunderbirds at <http://www.FreeSpiritGallery.ca/nwbirds.htm>.

The Bear in Pacific Northwest Native Indian Art

The Native American people have always had a special place in their hearts for the bear. Bears are portrayed in Pacific Northwest Native Indian art on totem poles, plaques, drawings, masks, jewelry and many other artworks. The bear represents a symbol of power, strength, learned humility, motherhood, teaching, healing and even dreaming. Bears are respected by the Northwest Native people for their human-like qualities. Bears in Pacific Northwest Native Indian art signify friendship and many are shown to be smiling.

Bears, regarded as masters of the forests, are also special from an environmental point of view because they are considered to be a part of the land shared by both bears and humans. Whatever happens to bears will affect the environment which will also ultimately affect humans. This relationship between bears and humans is depicted on giant bear-human masks as part of the art exhibits at Vancouver's International Airport.

Also interesting is that according to Northwest Native mythology, bears change into their spirit bodies to allow their earthly bodies to revitalize during winter hibernations. By Northwest Native tradition, a bear that is killed by hunters is taken to the house of the tribe's chief and treated like a guest of honor. Eagle down is sprinkled on the bear as a welcoming gesture. Dances and prayers are made to the bear's soul in order to ensure that no harm would later come to the hunters.



Bear by Peter Charlie

One of the most widely told Haida legends is that of the Bear Mother. She was a daughter of a tribe's chief who fell in love with and married a young handsome bear who was the nephew of a great bear chief. After the birth of twin bear cubs, the Bear Mother's brothers killed her bear husband during a hunt. As a result, the tribe agreed to use the bear as their crest which is how the bear clan started. This agreement maintained good relations between the bears and humans. The twin cubs, who had the ability to transform from bears to humans at will, became guardians of the land's people. The bear clan became one of the most respected of all Northwest Native Indian clans.



Bear by Cody Mathias

The Eagle in Pacific Northwest Native Indian Art

The eagle has been a universal symbol of power respected by many cultures throughout the world. The bald eagle was chosen as the emblem of the United States of America because of its great strength, majestic looks, long life and also because it was then believed in the 18th century to exist only in North America. The eagle was used as the name for the first space craft to land on the moon and even the Chinese developed a martial arts style based on the eagle.

The eagle is highly revered by many Native American cultures which have special eagle dances, ceremonies and societies. Both bald eagles and golden eagles along with their feathers are considered sacred. It is said that the Creator chose the eagle as the master of the skies. Since eagles fly higher and see better than other birds, they are considered to be closer to the Creator than any other Earth creatures. The eagle is regarded as a messenger to the Creator. It has the honor of carrying the prayers of humans in the world of the Earth to the world of Spirit where the Creator resides. It is believed that if one saw an eagle while praying or participating in a ceremony, prayers would be answered. Wearing or holding an eagle feather would also cause the Creator to take immediate notice. Some Native American tribes regard the wings of an eagle to be significant in representing the balance between a male and a female with each one dependent upon the strengths or abilities of the other.



Pacific Northwest Native Indian Art Bald Eagle by Paul Joseph

Eagles inhabit the Pacific Northwest Coast region in great numbers and have special significance for the Native Indian people who live there. The eagle is a symbol of power, leadership and prestige. It also represents wisdom since it flies high above the world giving it a broad perspective of everything. Its feathers or down represent peace and friendship. The feathers are used in many rituals and worn on masks, headdresses and aprons for dances. Eagle down was sprinkled before guests during welcome dances and other ceremonies. An eagle feather as a present is said to bring good luck to both the recipient and the giver. The eagle is a favorite subject in Pacific Northwest Native Indian art. See more examples of eagle carvings at <http://www.FreeSpiritGallery.ca/nwbirds.htm>.

The Killer Whale in Pacific Northwest Native Indian Art

One of the most awesome creatures in both real life and in Pacific Northwest Native Indian art is the orca or killer whale. Feared many years ago but now loved by millions of people around the world, the killer whale is one of the most prominent subjects for Northwest Native artists. The killer whale is regarded as the guardian as well as the ruler of the sea because of its sheer size and power. The killer whale is also seen as the best hunter of the sea.

Killer whales are symbols of longevity and romance since they are believed to mate for life. It is said that if fishermen ever injure a killer whale, it will capsize the canoe sinking the fishermen to the Village of the Whales. It is here where the fishermen will be transformed into whales themselves. Whales near the shore are believed to be humans who were transformed trying to communicate with their previous human families ashore. Others believe that killer whales are reincarnations of deceased native chiefs. Some legends claim that the first killer whale was previously a supernatural white wolf that entered the sea and transformed into a whale. Mother Earth painted markings on the side of the killer whale as a reminder that it used to be a member of the wolf family. Indeed, both the killer whale and wolf share similar characteristics as they both have similar coloring. They both also stay and hunt in family packs. There are also legends that describe the killer whale being able to transform back and forth into a wolf.



Killer Whale by Alan Natrall

Killer whales are thought to be the prey of the mythical thunderbird who is powerful enough to capture and carry a killer whale back to the mountains. The geography of some parts of the Pacific Northwest Coast region is thought to be the result of a legendary battle between the killer whale and thunderbird. The Haida have a legend about a raven finned killer whale who is a whale chief carrying a raven perched on top of his dorsal fin.



Killer Whale by Gary Baker

The orca or killer whale is one of the most popular subjects of Pacific Northwest Native Indian art (<http://www.FreeSpiritGallery.ca/nw/whales.htm>). A piece of art or jewelry featuring a killer whale is considered a most appropriate gift of romance or a present for an individual who brings harmony into one's life.

The Raven in Pacific Northwest Native Indian Art

The most important symbol to many Northwest Native people is the Raven bird who is considered the Creator's assistant. It is said that the Raven could transform himself into anything. He was responsible for supplying the rivers and seas with fish as well as putting the sun into the sky. This is why the Raven is sometimes referred to as the '*Bringer of Light*'. Interestingly enough, the Raven's antics were thought to be motivated by greed.

It was also said that he loved to tease and trick which gave him the reputation of being the trickster. Despite his selfishness, the Raven is also a cultural hero since his mischievous actions always helped the world.



Raven by Paul Joseph



Raven by Peter Charlie

According to one Pacific Northwest Native legend, an old chief hid the sun away in a box. The Raven transformed into a pine needle which dropped into the drinking water which the chief's daughter drank. She became pregnant and a son was born. One day, the chief finally gave into the Raven's (now disguised as his grandson) whining and allowed him to play with the sun in the box. Once the box was outside, the Raven broke it and transformed back to his original bird form. He then took the sun into his beak and flew up to the sky putting the sun back in its right place.

To the Northwest Native Indian people, gifts featuring the prestigious Raven symbol are appropriate for someone respected or considered a hero. Ravens are also part of the birds section at Free Spirit Gallery (<http://www.FreeSpiritGallery.ca/nwbirds.htm>).

The Salmon in Pacific Northwest Native Indian Art

There are several species of salmon fish in the Pacific Northwest region. These are the Coho, Sockeye, Pink, Chum, Atlantic and the largest which is the King or Chinook. Salmon are born in the rivers and swim down to the ocean where they live in the saltwater. At spawning time, they return to the river where they were born, lay the eggs, and then die. The young hatch and start the life cycle over again. Salmon fish have always been an important mainstay food source for the Northwest Native Indian people as well as much wildlife in the region including many large birds, bears, and river otters. This is the reason why the salmon is a popular subject in Northwest Native Indian artwork and culture.

According to Northwest Native legend, the salmon were actually people with superhuman abilities and eternal lives. The Salmon people lived in great houses under the ocean but since they knew that humans on land needed food, they offered themselves to the land based tribes as food by turning into salmon fish. Their spirits were returned back to the ocean where they were reborn again. One tribe on land was short of food because the salmon never came to their waters. But they heard about the Salmon people. So the chief sent out an expedition to find these Salmon people in order to ask them to come to their waters. After many days of travel, the expedition arrived in a new land where the Salmon people were. The chief of the Salmon people ordered four of their villagers to go into the sea where they became salmon as soon as the water reached their faces. He ordered others to retrieve these new salmon fish which were then cooked as a welcoming feast for the guests in the expedition.



Salmon by Cody Mathias

The chief told the guests to eat as much but the bones of the salmon fish, even the smallest ones, were not to be thrown out. All of the salmon bones were collected by the villagers after the guests were careful enough to lay them into little piles. The Salmon people then threw these bones back into the water. Minutes later, the four individuals who originally turned into the salmon fish reappeared and joined the others.

Over the next few days, the guests watched the Salmon people repeat this process with the salmon bones over and over again. However, during a subsequent feast, one of the guests from the expedition secretly held back some of the salmon bones. This time, when one of the Salmon people came back from out of the water, he was covering his face and said that some of the bones must be missing since his cheeks were gone. Another said that she was missing her chin.

Alarmed by what had happened, the guest brought out the missing salmon bones he had previously held back. The two Salmon people with missing body parts then went back into the sea with these bones. Upon their return back to land, both Salmon people had their complete bodies again.

The expedition asked the chief to let some of his Salmon people visit their waters and streams to help supply much needed food. The chief agreed to do so as long as the tribe agreed to throw back all the salmon bones into the water so that the Salmon people could return home intact. If this was not respected, the tribe was told that the Salmon people would refuse to return to the tribe's waters. So the tribe always honored the return of the salmon to their streams every year and respected the rules set by the Salmon people chief. This ensured an adequate food supply for the tribe every year.



Salmon with Eggs by Gary Baker

One interesting fact is that when White men first arrived to the region, the Northwest Native Indian people did not want to sell salmon to them. It was feared that the salmon not be treated with respect by the White men who were ignorant of the required customs and regulations set by the Salmon people. More examples of salmon carvings are at the Free Spirit Gallery website <http://www.FreeSpiritGallery.ca/salmons.htm>.

Pacific Northwest Native Indian Art Authenticity

Native American art has gained international recognition as a valuable art form over the past few decades. However, the rising popularity of Native American art has resulted in the increased proliferation of imitations and mass-produced reproductions of original Native arts. Some obvious fakes are made in Asia from molds where the finished pieces are forms of plastic, resin or ceramic.

Other fakes are actually made of materials simulating actual wood for imitation Pacific Northwest Native carvings. These fakes, which are harder to distinguish from authentic artwork, are often hand carved reproductions of an original piece of artwork. Workshops have illegally reproduced hundreds of copies without the artisan's permission. The counterfeiting companies would then attach some type of tag that claims the fake pieces were influenced by aboriginal artisans and even background information on the Native designs used in the artwork.

These are very deceptive tactics on their part since they give the consumers the impression that the imitations are authentic and income producing for the aboriginal communities. Fakes and imitations have lowered the image of authentic Native American art. Sales of genuine aboriginal artwork have declined which in turn have deprived aboriginal artisans of income. The argument against these claims is that not every consumer can afford to buy authentic Native American art so the souvenir level reproductions legitimately meet this part of the market. The imitations, which are usually low priced, enable foreign students for example, to bring home a souvenir without breaking their travel budget. This claim would have more support from native communities if aboriginal artisans were paid a fair royalty as income for each imitation and reproduction piece sold. However, this is seldom the case since most of the time, no royalties are paid at all.

The obvious fakes can be spotted quite easily. Purchased from a souvenir shop, the black totem pole shown below had a very flat uniform back and bottom giving away the fact that it came from a mold. Other totem poles made from wood or mixed wood with a claim that they were hand painted were among many similar pieces in the store. All of these examples were each priced less than \$20 Canadian which was another indicator that they were not original artwork.



Imitation Totem Poles

Imitations of Pacific Northwest Native Indian art carvings were recently spotted for sale in shops located at major Canadian airports. From a distance, these totem poles and other native souvenirs looked very authentic. However, each piece had several identical copies on the same shelf.

To avoid accidentally buying a fake or imitation, it is suggested that consumers buy Pacific Northwest Native Indian art from only reputable galleries and dealers rather than from tourist souvenir shops (more details in the next chapter). A piece of original, authentic Native American art is one of a kind. There should be no other identical pieces on the shelves. To see examples of some wonderful and authentic Northwest Native Indian art carvings on video, go to <http://www.FreeSpiritGallery.ca/nwartvideo.htm>.

Tips on Buying and Shopping for Authentic Carvings

Many visitors to the Pacific Northwest will be exposed to Native Indian art while touring the region, especially in British Columbia. Among this aboriginal artwork are the magnificent hand made Pacific Northwest Native Indian wood carvings by the Canadian aboriginal artists in BC. While in some of the major Canadian cities (Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal) or other tourist areas popular with international visitors such as Banff, such carvings will be seen at various retail shops and displayed at some museums as well as some public areas such as parks. Since Pacific Northwest Native Indian art has been getting more international exposure, people may be seeing this aboriginal fine art form at galleries and museums located outside the Northwest too.

As a result, many tourists and art collectors will decide to purchase Native Indian art as nice souvenirs for their homes or as very unique gifts for others. Assuming that the intention is to acquire an authentic piece rather than a cheap tourist imitation, the question arises on how does one tell apart the real thing from the fakes? It would be pretty disappointing to bring home a piece bought in Vancouver only to find out later that it isn't authentic or even made in Canada. One would have to be careful in tourist areas where all sorts of other souvenirs such as t-shirts, hockey jerseys, postcards, key chains, maple syrup and other Canadian items are sold.

The safest places to shop for Pacific Northwest Native Indian art carvings to ensure authenticity are always the reputable galleries that specialize in Native Indian art. Some of these galleries have advertisements in the city tourist guides found in hotels. Reputable Native Indian art galleries are also listed in magazines which focus on Native art such as American Indian Art and Native Peoples. These galleries will usually be located in the downtown tourist areas of major cities or within Indian reservations. When one walks into these galleries, one will see that there will be only Native Indian art and none of the other usual tourist souvenirs such as t-shirts or postcards. These galleries will have only authentic Native Indian art for sale as they do not deal with imitations or fakes. The carvings are usually signed by the carver.

Some of these galleries also have websites so you could shop and buy authentic Native Indian carvings from home anywhere in the world. In addition to these street retail specialty galleries, there are now reputable online galleries that also specialize in authentic Native Indian art. These online galleries are a good option for buying art since the prices are usually lower than those at street retail galleries due to lower overheads. Such as gallery is Free Spirit Gallery (<http://www.FreeSpiritGallery.ca>). Of course, like any other shopping on the internet, one must be careful so when dealing with an online gallery, make sure that their pieces have information on the actual artist or carver to ensure authenticity.

Some tourist shops do carry authentic Native Indian art as well as the other touristy souvenirs in order to cater to all types of tourists. When shopping at these types of stores, it is possible to tell apart the real pieces from the reproductions. Authentic Native Indian carvings are carved from wood. Reproductions are made of plastic or resin from a mold will be much lighter in weight. A reproduction will sometimes have a company name on it and will never feature an artist's signature.

An authentic Native Indian carving is a one of a kind piece of artwork and nothing else on the store shelves will look exactly like it. If there are duplicates of a certain piece with exact details, the piece is not authentic. If a piece looks too perfect in detail with absolute straight bottoms or sides like the fake totem poles shown in the previous chapter, it is probably not real. Of course, if a piece features a sticker indicating that it was made in an Asian country, then it is obviously a fake. There will also be a huge price difference between authentic pieces and the imitations.

Where it becomes more difficult to determine authenticity are with the reproductions that are also made of wood or some type of wood composite. This can be a real gray area to those unfamiliar with authentic Native Indian art. They may even have some type of tag indicating that it was hand made or painted but if there are other pieces on the shelves that look too similar in detail, they are most likely crafts produced in large quantities rather than authentic fine art originals. The authentic pieces will always be the highest priced and are usually kept in a separate shelf or wall within the store.

Interior Decorating and Pacific Northwest Native Indian Art

Since there has been a trend in recent years towards more earthy color tones for interior decorating, Pacific Northwest Native Indian art can fit in nicely as part of home decor. Most subjects used in Native American art tend to be focused on nature whether the pieces are prints, carvings or pottery. Colors tend to be earthy shades of browns, reds, blacks and yellows since the main raw materials are wood as with the Native Indian carvings from the Pacific Northwest region. Even painted wood carvings or pottery tend to have natural colors often found in nature such as greens and blues. All of these colors work well with the more natural styles of interior decorating today.

The Pacific Northwest region produces some excellent Native Indian art in the form of wood carvings including plaques, bowls and furniture. This is not surprising since the Pacific Northwest is abundant with forests which have provided the wood as raw material for the region's Native Indian art. The wood is sometimes painted in striking colors or just stained with natural looking browns. Either way, such pieces fit in perfectly in rooms with earthy color tones.

Many walls of living rooms, bedrooms, office den rooms, hallways and even bathrooms have been enhanced with Pacific Northwest Native Indian art in the form of both prints and wood plaque carvings. The Northwest Native artists also make some of the most striking aboriginal masks in the world which are also suitable for hanging on walls.

Native American Indian art as home decor helps bring in an atmosphere of nature in the overall interior decorating of a room. This is because of their natural colors and also their subject matters which tend to be animals such as eagles, bears, thunderbirds, killer whales and salmons. Pacific Northwest Native Indian art in particular gives homes in that region a local flavor. Many homes and offices in this part of North America have this type of artwork as part of interior decorating.

The Northwest style of Native American Indian art is still relatively unknown to many parts of North America and the rest of the world. Therefore, for homes outside of the Pacific Northwest region, a nice wood carving can be seen as exotic treasure brought back from a homeowner's travels. Check out some examples of Pacific Northwest Native Indian art either in a gallery or online (<http://www.FreeSpiritGallery.ca>) and imagine how a piece or two can be part of your home's interior decorating.

Profile of Carver Gary Baker

It's the eyes that make Pacific Northwest Native Indian art carver Gary Baker unique among his peers. Whether his carving subject is an eagle, salmon or killer whale, the animal will often have that distinctive, 'Baker' art eye. Born in 1963, Gary Mathias Ray Baker is affectionately known as '*Boo Boo*' in his Squamish Nation community in North Vancouver, Canada. He said that he would hide behind things when he was a kid and then pop out saying '*Boo Boo*' to his relatives.



Gary Baker

At age 14, Gary watched his cousin Cody Mathias carve and soon decided that he wanted to learn. He cites Warren Joseph, Ritchie Baker as well as his cousin Cody as his main teachers in Pacific Northwest Native Indian art carving. Today, he often carves 7 days per week but also serves as a fisheries officer at the Capilano River on a seasonal basis. One of the reasons why his salmon carvings are so magnificent is perhaps his familiarity with the fish resulting from 18 years working at the river.

The Baker family tree includes the thunderbird, eagle, killer whale and bear, which usually become other subjects of Gary's artwork. Like many Northwest Native Indian artists, Gary creates his subjects free hand without looking at a picture. He claims that Northwest Native artists have photographic minds that help them create their subjects from memory.



Gary Baker at Work

According to Gary, there's lots of interest among the Squamish Nation youth in the arts. He says they see the money that can be earned from creating and selling their cultural artwork. However, he claims that the kids must take their time to develop. *"It took me 10 years to get good,"* says Gary. *"It will take 5 to 10 years for an average beginner to develop."* In fact, Gary advises beginners to learn to draw first as a prerequisite before learning to carve.

Gary often gets together with friends to carve as a way of group bonding and motivation. *"My buddies inspire me,"* he claims. Being a community-oriented artist, he also helps out some of the younger carvers with their artwork.



Salmon by Gary Baker



Bald Eagle by Gary Baker

In Gary's opinion, Pacific Northwest Native Indian art has changed over the years. He states, *"The newer styles have more shape than the old traditional styles, especially on totem poles."* When asked what he would like to see for the future of Pacific Northwest Native Indian art, Gary replied, *"I would like our art to be more published around the world."*

The Gary Baker art eyes on his artwork are presently staring out from walls of homes all over North America plus as far away as Japan and Germany. With the increasing interest in Pacific Northwest Native Indian art both domestically and abroad, those distinctive Baker eyes will definitely see much more of the world.

Gary Baker's artwork is featured on a video at <http://www.FreeSpiritGallery.ca/nwartvideo.htm>.

Profile of Carver Peter Charlie

Born in 1957, Peter Charlie of the Squamish Nation in North Vancouver, Canada learned to carve from his grandfather at the age of 10. Today, he is one of the very best carvers of Pacific Northwest Native Indian art. In fact, his artwork has much more detail and three dimensional shape than found on most contemporary Northwest Native Indian art wood carvings. Peter has worked with bone and silver but prefers wood as his main carving material. He claims that his artistic inspiration comes naturally from inside him. There's also the desire to always create one of a kind artwork as he says, *"I want to make each piece unique."*



Peter Charlie

Unlike other Northwest Native carvers who work on one piece at a time, Peter prefers to work on several carvings at once. He will take a group of carvings together through each stage of the art process. So every week, a new group of Peter Charlie art carvings are usually finished together.



Peter Charlie at Work

Peter has noticed a high interest level in the arts among his community's youth. He claims that this interest comes from a renewed desire to learn about their people's history. With art, he says, *"Our people can hold on to their history in the modern world."* He would suggest to beginners to learn by watching experienced carvers until the craft blends into their frames of mind. In Peter's opinion, learning to shape on wood would take at least a year and developing into a decent carver would take four to five years.

Peter thinks that Pacific Northwest Native Indian art today has more free designs compared to the old traditional styles. He is likely one of the innovators leading this evolution as he says, *"My artwork is more realistic looking now ... I like to give them more life rather than leave them flat or one dimensional."* Peter Charlie is an example of a master artisan who is able to add innovation to his artwork while keeping with Northwest Native art traditions.



Eagle by Peter Charlie



Bear by Peter Charlie

As for the future of his people's cultural art forms, Peter says, *"I would like to see more museums and more exposure for our art."* With the popularity of Pacific Northwest Native Indian art growing, Peter Charlie will emerge into the public eye as one of this aboriginal art style's top carvers.

Peter Charlie's artwork is featured on a video at <http://www.FreeSpiritGallery.ca/nwartvideo.htm>

Profile of Carver Cody Mathias

Saying that Cody Mathias comes from a large family is an understatement. The Pacific Northwest Native Indian art master carver has 17 siblings (he was born in 1962 as the 5th boy). As a young child, Cody would watch his father and grandfather for hours as they worked on 20 foot totem poles. Eventually, his father, grandfather and an older brother taught Cody to carve.



Cody Mathias

Cody claims that when he looks at a piece of wood, it talks to him. *"I put some thought into a piece to bring out the character of it"* he says. *"Sometimes it's an eagle, sometimes it's a killer whale and sometimes it's something else."*



Cody Mathias at Work

Today, Cody is one of the few contemporary Pacific Northwest Native Indian artisans who prefer to carve in the traditional style where the surface carves are left intact rather than smoothly sanded down. The bumpy appearance gives his carvings a very unique look, much like the older totem poles found in the west coast of Canada.

In addition to doing his own artwork, Cody also teaches carving to the younger generation from his Squamish Nation community in North Vancouver. He taught carving to his nephew Charles August, who is now also an accomplished Pacific Northwest Native Indian art carver. Cody's own artwork has changed over the years as he says, *"My artwork has more shape and cleaner cuts these days."*



Bear by Cody Mathias



Killer Whale Carvings by Cody Mathias

Cody's residence is often the place where other carvers including his cousin, master carver Gary 'Boo Boo' Baker, meet to carve for the day. Cody hopes that more people will look at Pacific Northwest Native Indian art in the future. With more tourists visiting Vancouver and Canada, this striking style of Canadian aboriginal art will become more known than ever before.

Cody Mathias' artwork is featured on a video at <http://www.FreeSpiritGallery.ca/nwartvideo.htm>

Profile of Carver Paul Joseph

One of the highlights of Paul Joseph's career so far was to meet the King and Queen of Spain for whom he made a totem pole for. Born in 1960, the Pacific Northwest Native Indian art carver also comes from royal lineage of some sort as his grandfather was Chief Moses Joseph of the Squamish Nation in BC, Canada.



Paul Joseph

Paul learned to carve when he was just nine years old. Credits go to his uncle, Chief Norman Joseph and Darcy Joseph as his carving teachers.



Paul Joseph at Work

Paul gets his artistic inspiration from the history of his people and says, "*I want to keep the culture going.*" The subjects of his artwork depend on what he sees in each piece of wood. Compared to works by other carvers, Paul's pieces are usually more detailed and complex. An average wooden plaque will take five to six hours to complete while a small totem may take about three days. Paul's bird carvings with wings spread out are very impressive. He is one of the very few carvers who will take the time to make such detailed carvings.



He claims that the younger generation of his community gets exposed to their cultural artwork through pow-wows and art shows which result in high interest to pursue art as chosen careers. They see art as a financially viable occupation. However, Paul considers a four to five year period to be compulsory as development time for new carvers.

By his observation, there are more Northwest Native carvers now than ever before and the numbers will likely increase. *"Our art will travel so it will be big"* says Paul.

Paul would like to see the emergence of working art studios for not only Northwest Native artists, but for all natives to do their cultural artwork. He thinks that this would be a good way for native artists to interact with each other. Like others in his community, he would also like to see more Pacific Northwest Native Indian art museums displaying his people's art. At least for now, we all know that one of Paul's totem poles is being proudly displayed somewhere in the Royal Palace in Spain.

Bear, Chief & Salmon
by Paul Joseph



Raven by Paul Joseph

Paul Joseph's artwork is featured on a video at <http://www.FreeSpiritGallery.ca/nwartvideo.htm>

Additional Resources

Free Spirit Gallery

Exquisite Pacific Northwest Native Indian & Inuit Art Treasures

Beautiful artwork at affordable online prices delivered right to your home or office (free shipping within North America for many items)

Information Resource Articles & Videos – Free eCards

<http://www.FreeSpiritGallery.ca>

Inuit & Native Art Bulletin

News from aboriginal art producing communities

<http://www.inuitnativeart.blogspot.com>

Native American Names & Meanings eBook

2,500 names by tribe or native origin, gender, alphabet, English meaning and category

<http://freespipub.nativenam.hop.clickbank.net>

To tell a friend about this eBook, go to <http://www.FreeSpiritGallery.ca/tellnwebook.htm>.