Kwakiutl of the Canadian Northwest Coast (1800–Current)
- Pronounced "kwah-kee-oo-tull"
- The Kwakiutl people lived on the northern end of Vancouver Island and the adjacent mainland of British Columbia. The images below focus on art that was created in the late nineteenth century.
- Kwakiutl life was divided into summer and winter residences.
- Summer (Bakoostime) life focused on gathering food resources to preserve for the cold winter season.
- In winter, villages were moved away from the coast to the mainland.
- Primary focus of winter (Tsetseka) life was ceremony, such as initiations, marriages, feasts, and performances associated with secret societies.

Gift-Giver Society Masks
- Supernatural gift-giver society (called Dluwalakha).
- Tied to totemic beliefs and high-ranking or chiefly status
- Many animal, human, and natural phenomena mask forms
- Animal masks often mixture of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic forms

Cannibal Society Masks
- Associated with forces of the primordial forest and spirit world engaged in uncivilized behaviors—those dangerous to man’s well being
- Characters included the wild cannibal woman Tsonoqua, the wild man of the woods Bookwus (her husband), a fool named Nulmal, a sea-monster spirit named I-Akim, a long-beaked skull-cracking bird known as Hoxhok, a raven spirit helper, several multiple-headed cannibalistic spirit masks, and several masks which could change into two different identities during a ceremonial dance.
Common Characteristics of Kwakiutl Masks

- Masks were carved from red and yellow cedar (abundant in the area) and painted.
- Sometimes hair was attached.
- The basic design consisted of form lines painted against a dark background of deeply carved planes, and visual accents at the eyes, nose, and mouth.
- Masks used lines on smooth concave and convex curves and sharp, rigid lines for effect or emphasis on a feature.
- Rigid curves were used to delineate nostrils, eyes and lips, using deeply cut carving and/or use of a contrasting color.
- Most of the lines had the tendency to run parallel and taper to a terminal point at each end creating contrast in shape between the geometric and organic lines.
- Painting was used to enhance, emphasize or embellish the basic form of the mask.
- The traditional Kwakiutl choice of colors for paint were dark red, black, white, and green.
- Transformation masks were used during a masked performance when the story line dictated a change in character. To transform, the dancer would turn away from his audience and pull on hidden strings beneath the mask. This would make the outer mask split apart to reveal the new spirit identity beneath.

Additional Information

- The winter months were the ceremonial or supernatural season when elaborate theatrical performances and ceremonies were staged. The Klasila, a four day period prior to the start of winter, included song, dance, and ceremony. All types of masks were displayed at this time. Potlatches, which were competitive feasts, were another occasion where masks were vital for enacting family dances and dramas accompanied by song.

Test Questions:

1. What are the two types of masks made by the Kwakiutl?
2. What were some unique qualities of the summer and winter for the Kwakiutl? How did their life change for these seasons?
3. How and why were transformation masks used?
4. How and why were cannibal society masks used?
5. List 5 common characteristics of Kwakiutl masks.
6. Animal masks were a mixture of what two forms?

References


