Raven Imagery in Northwest Coast Indian Art
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The Raven was a central facet to the Native American Indian tribes among the Northwest Coast of North America. Within the Tlingit, Tsimshian, and Haida cultures, many existing art forms focused on the image of the Raven. Central to mythology, legends, and ancestral tales, the Raven was thought to not only have unparalleled supernatural powers, but to have been responsible for providing features of life and earth as the Northwest Coast Indian peoples knew it. For example, Hilary Stewart thoroughly explains,

“Most important of all creatures to the coast Indian peoples was the Raven. It was Raven—the Transformer, the cultural hero, the trickster, the Big Man (he took many forms to many peoples)—who created the world. He put the sun, moon and stars into the sky, fish into the sea, salmon into the rivers, and food onto the land; he maneuvered the tides to assure daily access to beach resources. Raven gave the people fire and water, placed the rivers, lakes and cedar trees over the land and peopled the earth” (Stewart 57).

As such an important staple to the Indian cultural groups of the Northwest Coast, the Raven was honored in numerous art forms, namely sculpture, paintings, articles of clothing, masks, and crest imagery. An exploration into the cultural groups responsible for the powerful Raven figure within art is appropriate, including stories and works of art such as Raven Stealing the Moon, The Raven and the First Men, Raven Stealing the Sun, the Raven as crest imagery, and the Raven Barbecuing Hat. It is important to note, however, that the myths associated with the Raven vary across cultures and time.

As previously stated, the Raven tends to be a dominating image among Tlingit, Tsimshian, and Haida artists, among others. Its prevalence indicates a need to understand the significance surrounding such an image—its origin, mythology, and honorary tributes. The Haida culture, located on the Queen Charlotte Islands of British Columbia, supports two clan images, the Raven and the Eagle. Similarly, within the Tlingit culture, two moieties are represented: the Raven and the Wolf (Maxfield 36). The Raven’s power, in Haida mythology,
was recognized when he steals the moon from the sky on the night of the first moon. According to foretold legends, the Raven was a beggar, constantly bothering the fishermen to feed him portions of their daily catches. However, when the people become irritated with the Raven and tell him they will no longer feed him, the Raven makes good on his threat to steal the moon, leaving the people in fear of the darkness of the night. Four days later, the Raven makes a proposition, suggesting that if the fishermen agree to feed him their fish, he will return the moon to its rightful place high in the sky. The people agreed, now understanding the true authority of the Raven (Erdoes & Ortize 250-252). To pay homage to this celebrated story, Haida artist Robert Davidson creates a masterpiece appropriately titled Raven Stealing the Moon, in 1977 (Figure 1). This artwork was created using silkscreen print on paper, and makes use of the popular form-line design also used by countless other northwest coast artists (Penney 164-165). The colors most heavily used within this print are red and black, which, in Haida art, refer to the ancestral traditions of the Haida peoples. Hilary Stewart notes that traditional and contemporary artists seldom stray from these two colors, which is a stamp of “purity,” as well as “a look that is clearly Haida” (Stewart 104). In addition, Raven Stealing the Moon may appear somewhat busy in that there are relatively few, if any, spaces left untouched on the print. Regarding this apparent lack of emptiness, Hilary Stewart explains, “…large ovoids are used as structural body parts… in empty corners… blank spaces are never left unadorned. Although a large design may be filled with larger elements, it retains a highly unified, structural look,” (Stewart 104).

Similarly, The Raven and the First Men, a sculpture created by another Haida artist, Bill Reid was entirely completed by 1983 (Figure 2). This work of art relates to the Haida interpretations of how ancestral beings began, according to legend. This story suggests that the first men and women were slyly coaxed out of clam shells by the Raven, as he discovered them
and sought control over their timidity and insecurity. However, contrary to the depiction of bashfulness displayed by the beings within the Haida tales, Reid’s sculpture opposes this shy nature (Berlo & Phillips 173-175). Regarding both these initial Haida peoples and his representation of them, Bill Reid explains;

“No timid shell dwellers, these children of the wild coast… Their descendants would build on its beaches the strong, beautiful home of the Haidas and embellish them with the powerful heraldic carvings that told of the legendary beginnings of the great families, all the heroes and heroines, the gallant beasts and monsters that shape their world and their destinies” (Berlo & Phillips 173).

Reid’s sculpture was created using form-line design, in which the enormous Raven sits predatorily atop an opening clam shell, from which small, unclothed human figures emerge. Arguably the most significant aspect of this recreation of a significant Haida myth is the alternative interpretation of the myth’s event by the artist. Rather than the traditional telling of the story, in which the Raven’s interest and curiosity beckons them from within the shell, Reid challenges traditionalism by depicting human curiosity and wonder instead (Berlo & Phillips 173-175).

In comparing the various cultures existing in the Northwest Coast, Stanley Walens explains; “Every Northwest Coast group had a myth about how the world as we know it came into existence… Perhaps the most famous of these is the story about how Raven stole the sun,” (Walens 185-186). This legend, according to Northwest Coast culture, states that a single man possessed all the wonders of the world in a single box (which included the sun). The Raven, having magical powers, implanted himself in the man’s daughter, and was born to her as this man’s grandson. When the Raven’s grandfather agreed to let him play with the sun, the Raven took it, transforming from boy to beautiful white-feathered bird. However, the sun grew too hot in the Raven’s beak, and singed his pure feathers to black. The Raven then dropped the sun in the
sky, where it sits for the universe to delight in (Walens 186). Celebrating this legendary event, Ken Mowatt recreates the scene in his print entitled *Raven Stealing the Sun*, completed in 1990 (Figure 3). *Raven Stealing the Sun* depicts Raven, drawn in form-line design, carrying the sun in his beak. Below the Raven is the box which the Raven stole the sun from—the box full of treasures that belonged to his grandfather. Again, similar to *Raven Stealing the Moon*, red and black pigments dominate the print. The black lines are generally used to clearly define the face, feathers, wings, and eyes of the Raven, while red is a secondary color in the form-line design, used to depict the sun and the box. Another suggestion that this artwork was the creation of a Haida artist is demonstrated in the size of the beak and head relative to the rest of the Raven’s body, as well as the dimensions of the sun. Hilary Stewart notes of Northwest Coast art, “Often the head of a creature occupies nearly half the length of the figure, as though the head were the most important feature,” (Stewart 104). It is common, too, to incorporate a face, or the profile of a face, into suns, much like that of the sun depicted in Mowatt’s *Raven Stealing the Sun*. According to Hilary Stewart, the face within the sun in many Northwest Coast cultural artworks makes the object unmistakably recognizable and dramatic with powerfully designed rays emitting from it (Stewart 82). The idea in this print is that Raven has just captured the sun from the box and is in-flight towards the sky with the sun in his large beak.

Crest imagery among peoples, such as the Haida and Tlingit, largely revolves around the Raven, along with the stories and legends associated with it. A tribe’s crest is commonly placed on objects that play significant roles in spiritual performances, and the purposes of these crests are to identify the clan to their ancestors, as well as to describe the group’s history and accomplishments (Walens 189). For example, crest imagery can be displayed on blankets, tobacco pipes, bowls, totem poles, sculpture, print art, rain screens, masks, hats, tools, and
weaponry, though crest art is certainly not limited to those mediums. One particularly noteworthy object in which the Raven crest can be observed comes from the Tlingit village of Sitka in Alaska. The Sea Lion House of L’uknax Adi (Ravens) produced a Raven Barbecuing Hat during the early 1800’s, refers to yet another Northwest Coast myth (Figure 4; Penney 149). The legend commemorated here is the story of how, after catching a salmon, the Raven tricks all other animals that have gathered into going on “fool’s errands” for a promised barbeque, so he can consume all the fish for himself (Penney 148). These objects were intended to allude to the particular clan’s heritage, rights, and authenticity, and were most likely worn solely by chiefs during potlatch ceremonies. Atop the head of the Raven on the hat are eight small, circular woven baskets, which were made by women in the cultural groups. The purpose of these baskets is to display how many potlatch ceremonies the wearer has thrown—thus the chief’s “spiritual purity through philanthropy” (Walens 185). Potlatches were ceremonies in which a chief would invite hundreds of guests to his home, including neighboring clans as well as enemies, and distribute all of his food and wealth among the attendees in order to benefit others the way the Raven benefited the Northwest Coast peoples (Walens 185). This particular hat employs slight form-line design imagery around the Raven’s body, and applies a great use of red, blue and black pigments. As the women produced the basket cylinders on top of the hat, the men were the primary hat creators, carving them from wood and painting designs on them. Also featured on the Raven Barbecuing Hat are furs extending from the uppermost basket, and hair coming out of the wood carved head. This object is a significant aspect of Tlingit culture, as well as a work of art that deserves attention and respect.

Countless objects within the distinctive Northwest Coast cultures are based upon the mythology of the Raven. These ceremonial, spiritual, and everyday entities serve important roles
in cultural groups, but also represent highly admired works of art. For example, the prints *Raven Stealing the Moon*, and *Raven Stealing the Sun*, pay tribute to the legends of how the Raven brought light to the world. Other myths, such as the Raven discovering the first beings and the Raven tricking the other animals, inspire wood sculptures like *The Raven and the First Men* and the Raven Barbecuing Hat. Although many of these artworks apply similar designs, it is important to understand the slight variations by culture group within art. In addition, myths by culture should also be adhered to, as they often tell stories about particular works of art.
Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4

Raven Barbecuing Hat, Tlingit, L’ooknax.adì Clan, Sea Lion House, Sitka, Alaska, ca. AD1800-1900 Wood, pigment, ermine, puffin beaks, hide; H. 50 cm (19.5 in.)
Works Cited


Works Consulted


