

CANADIAN NORTHWEST COAST COLLECTION

World Cultures collection

The museum has a small, but important collection of carved items made by the Haida people of Haida Gwaii, off the Northwest Coast of Canada. The collection consists of 13 objects including panel pipes, model totem poles and a recorder.

Most of the objects are made from argillite, which is a dense, black, sedimentary rock, rich in carbon, that is formed through volcanic eruption. It is a soft stone that can be carved with similar tools to those used for carving wood. Argillite can be found on Graham Island, Haida Gwaii, and has been quarried by the Haida people since the 1820s. It is possible that argillite carving developed so that the Haida could continue to trade with Europeans following a decline in the fur trade

PANEL PIPES

Tobacco pipes may have been the first type of object carved in argillite by Haida people in the 1820s. While early trade pipes could be used to smoke tobacco, later examples were decorative rather than functional. These panel pipes were made to be sold to tourists, but included traditional Haida designs. They depict insects, animals, humans and spirits which are linked or intertwined. Very often it is difficult to recognise a particular meaning or story in the design as some figures are not easy to identify. Panel pipes depicting ships became common around 1840 and stopped appearing about 1870. The Haida people were fascinated with European life and carvers recreated scenes in their art.

Panel pipe (1899.42.1710x)

The coiling sea serpent which forms the base of this pipe is probably derived from a double-coiled serpent or dragon found on musket guns traded by Europeans. Panel pipes in other museums feature similar imagery.



Panel pipe (1899.42.1711x)

This pipe features four sailors and unusually depicts a woman (far left). It is almost certain that the woman is Haida rather than European. Her skirts are drawn apart at the back to reveal her naked bottom indicating that she was probably sold as a slave to European sailors.



RECORDERS

Argillite recorders were based on the European equivalents seen by the Haida carvers. The holes are evenly spaced so would play a tune, but the notes do not mirror either European or Haida music so they were probably not meant to be played. There are only about 24 known examples of argillite recorder.

1924.145

The recorder is decorated with three frogs, sitting along the body of the instrument, facing an eagle.



Argillite is a delicate material and the recorder was once broken

into four pieces. The mouthpiece and end piece are made of lead and the use of this different material had made the object even more fragile. The recorder has been conserved at the museum and all the pieces have been reassembled. When Emma wrote her report the location of the end piece was not known, but it has since been discovered and attached.

TABLEWARE

Copies of Western style tableware were common items for Haida carvers to sell to Europeans.

Argillite plates and dishes were decorated using mostly floral and geometric designs. Usually both the inside and the outside of the plate were carved.

1903.90.4417x

The stylised images of leaves and berries on this dish are thought to represent a tobacco plant native to Haida Gwaii.



MODEL TOTEM POLES

Another popular subject for Haida carvers were model totem poles. Early examples were based on real poles in Haida villages. Later, the carvers created their own designs, sometimes based on traditional stories.

1918.43.1

This is probably quite an early model totem post made between 1860 and 1880. The topmost figure is a human who is holding the dorsal fin of a whale below. Underneath the whale is another human, upside down. Below these are a grizzly bear and what could be a traditional figure known as Gunarhnisimget.

