

First Nations Art: A Unique Cultural Experience in British Columbia

ITM London

Dream catcher



Throughout Canada the art of the first nations peoples is on display in museums and art galleries. It is deeply symbolic with a mythology that has relevance to the experiences of the 21st century. British Columbia takes special pride in the heritage of the first nations peoples. Its magnificent Museum of Anthropology on the campus of the University of British Columbia allows visitors to walk among the totem poles and learn about the Indians of the America's through displays in numerous galleries and through a fascinating tour of the museum.

When European settlers came to British Columbia more than 150 years ago, they found it was already inhabited by thousands of Aboriginal peoples. According to archaeological evidence, these people had been living on the West Coast for over 10 to 12 thousand years, for much longer according to Aboriginal oral tradition.

Today, there are approximately 200,000 Aboriginal people in British Columbia. Aboriginal people include First Nations, Inuit, Métis and children of First Nations and European settlers. There are

198 distinct First Nations in B.C. They speak more than 30 different languages. Each nation has its own unique tradition and history.

As Europeans moved into Aboriginal territories, they introduced their philosophies, technologies and political and economic systems. Relationships between Aboriginal peoples and settlers varied across regions and changed over time. Sometimes, differences in language, culture and world-view peacefully co-existed; other times, they clashed in conflict, leaving a legacy of mistrust. For many years,



Beaver T-shirt by Gordon White



Copper Man by Jim Charlie

Hills Native Art



governments and religions did not recognize Aboriginal peoples' rights, and they developed policies to eliminate the rich and diverse languages and cultures.

This changed completely in the 20th century when the rights of the first nations peoples were recognised and their cultural manifestations introduced into the mainstream of Canadian life. Magnificent aboriginal sculptures welcome millions of travellers when they arrive at Vancouver airport and the motifs of the first

nations peoples are found throughout the city. Distinctive thunderbirds, massive totem poles and intricate masks seem to crop up everywhere and are in the forefront of Vancouver's art scene. For visitors, First Nations art can be a way to truly experience a unique culture. Because art was often worn or used for practical purposes — in ceremonies and storytelling, for example — First Nations art pieces provide a great deal of insight into aboriginal life. The best examples of First Nations

art is in Vancouver's galleries.

All the galleries feature impressive collections of ceremonial masks, totem poles, bowls and rattles, bentwood boxes, basketry, paddles, prints, original paintings, miniatures, argillite carvings, glass sculptures and much more. There is also handcrafted jewellery in fine gold and sterling silver.

The Coastal Peoples Fine Arts Gallery was established in 1996 and is ideally situated in two key

downtown locations – urban Yaletown and historic Gastown. Each has an inviting atmosphere within a restored warehouse setting which complements the exquisitely handcrafted artwork by authentic aboriginal artists inhabiting British Columbia's Northwest Coast and the Inuit communities of Canada's Arctic regions.

Since 1979 the Inuit Gallery of Vancouver Ltd has presented a



Inuit Gallery



Mask



Soft soap

museum-quality collection of masterwork Inuit and Northwest Coast Native art. It has been a dominant force in promoting both Inuit and Northwest Coast Native art as Fine Art forms and is renowned for presenting groundbreaking exhibitions, many of which have helped shaped the direction of both art forms.

The gallery specializes in fine Inuit sculpture in stone and bone, Inuit prints and original drawings; museum-quality Northwest Coast First Nations masks, totem poles,

bentwood boxes and other ceremonial objects. Some of the many Inuit sculptors represented include John Pangark, Judas Ullulaq, Barnabus Arnasungaaq, Lucy Tasseor, and Toonoo Sharkey. Northwest Coast artists include master artists Joe David, Ken McNeil, Dempsey Bob, Tim Paul, William White as well as many of the talented next generation of young carvers.

The late Marion Scott was actually the first curator to organize a major exhibition of Inuit sculpture on the

West Coast. The tradition continues with the Marion Scott Gastown gallery, which specializes in both contemporary and traditional First Nations Art and has become one of the anchors for creative art exhibitions. Featured artists include Luke Anowtalik and Victoria Mamnguqsualuk.

The story of Lloyd and Frances Hill began in 1946 when they first acquired the Koksilah General Store and Post Office. Koksilah

(pronounced coke-sy-la) is a small community on the East coast of Vancouver Island, just one mile south of Duncan.

During the early years, the Hills created an outlet for the local Native artists who were encouraged to display and sell their work. As time passed, visitors to Koksilah became aware of the Hill's reputation and their unique art so word spread across the country. As the Hill family business expanded, new stores were

Museum of Anthropology
Vancouver





The Costal Peoples Fine Arts Gallery

opened on Vancouver Island in Victoria, Nanaimo and Campbell River. Hill's flagship store, in the heart of Vancouver's charming Gastown, is just steps away from the Frances Hill's shop.

Gastown, founded in 1867, is Vancouver's birthplace with historic Victorian architecture. Along its cobble-stoned streets are quaint courtyards, cafes, galleries, fine boutiques, shops and restaurants with day and night time entertainment. Every year, Hill's Gallery becomes an integral

part of the renowned du Maurier International Jazz Festival in June – an incredible multi-day event attended by 350,000 jazz enthusiasts.

With five outlets in British Columbia, Hill's Native Art has acquired the largest and most varied collection of First Nations and Inuit arts and crafts. Hill's has caught worldwide attention as the largest Northwest Coast Native Art Gallery in North America, and has exhibited hundreds of works by emerging and internationally

renowned artists. At any given time, Hill's features over 1200 Native artists and represents every Tribe and Nation of the Northwest Coast.

The jewel in the crown showcasing first nations art is Vancouver's Museum of Anthropology founded

in 1949 in the basement of the Main Library at the University of British Columbia. Today, Canada's largest teaching museum is located in a spectacular building overlooking mountains and sea - its collections, exhibitions and programs renowned for giving

Traditional box from the Inuit Gallery





Traditional design



Work at the spirit gallery

access and insight into the cultures of indigenous peoples around the world.

The Museum houses over 38,000 ethnographic objects and 535,000 archaeological objects, many of which originate from the Northwest Coast of British Columbia. Massive totem poles, carved boxes, bowls, and feast dishes are featured in the Museum's Great Hall, while smaller (but no less magnificent) pieces in gold, silver, argillite, wood, ceramic, and other materials are exhibited elsewhere in the galleries.

MOA's Multiversity Galleries provide public access to almost 10,000 objects from around the world, and The Audain Gallery, MOA's new 5,800 sq ft temporary exhibition hall, showcases world-class travelling exhibits as well as those developed in-house.

The museum is a good place to start the journey of discovery into the culture of the first nations peoples – a journey without an end as its magic and message never leaves the person who has experienced it even if only for a short time.