

Culture



MARITIME PEOPLES OF THE ARCTIC AND NORTHWEST COAST, FIELD MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY, CHICAGO

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Exhibition / Exposition

MARITIME PEOPLES OF THE ARCTIC AND NORTHWEST COAST, FIELD MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY, CHICAGO.

By *G.F. MacDonald*
National Museum of Man

The new exhibition gallery at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, entitled Maritime Peoples of the Arctic and Northwest Coast, took six years and five million dollars to bring into being.

This effort, applied to one of the finest collections in the world of Northwest and Arctic coast ethnographic collections, results in a spectacular and dramatic presentation that opened to the public in May 1982.

The same aura of magic and transformation is achieved in certain parts of the Chicago Gallery as in the American Museum of Natural History that prompted Levi Strauss to write "There is in New York a magic place where all the dreams of childhood hold a rendez-vous, where century old tree trunks sing or speak, where indefinable objects lie in wait for the visitor with an anxious stare..." (from the Art of the Northwest Coast at The American Museum of Natural History, *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 24, 1943 : 180-81). The view through the last half of the gallery to a cluster of twenty-six house posts and totem poles is a memorable one. Modern technology has added further to the drama of light playing on carved and painted surfaces by means of hundreds of dimmer switches planted beneath the carpets which light the visitor's way through the dimly-lit aisles and alcoves.

The magnificent collections at Chicago were assembled primarily by Franz Boas and Charles F. Newcombe, first for the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 and later for the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904. Both of these exhibitions gave the Field Museum the chance to acquire good, well-documented pieces from throughout the coast.

The exhibition is divided into five sections dealing with the prehistoric, economic, social and religious aspects of Indian and Eskimo cultures. The beginning section of the exhibition which deals with the ecology of the two areas is decidedly the weakest area. Much space in this area that should have been devoted to the superlative pieces in the

collection was assigned to elaborate, large scale models that simply do not work. The first model diorama of the coast ecological zone is on such a small scale that the scores of birds, animals and fish it contains can be distinguished only by the curators who on opening day carried flashlights to point them out. A second set of models, one an Eskimo camp on the ice and the other a Northwest Coast village with a fish weir, are vast sheets of bronze. At least that is what they appear to be, and were intended to be, but in fact they are bronze-covered fibreglass. The original intention was also that they be open to close scrutiny, but fear for the safety of the small figures or the model resulted in glass shrouding on both of them. They are now almost a parody of a primordial museum show case, and represent much wasted money and even more precious, space.

I stress space because certain areas of the exhibit are overly crowded. Objects in some cases are so densely packed that it is impossible to see the entire piece because several other pieces overlap from every possible view. Photography of the specimens is always challenging and often impossible.

Although never referred to by the term "open storage" the density of many exhibits puts them clearly in this category. Personally, I think this is a welcome relief from the art gallery approach that demanded so much viewing space for each object that the vast majority of the collection retreated from the galleries to the storehouse. There are over 2500 objects on display in the Maritime Peoples' Gallery, and I can attest from visits to their storerooms that ninety percent of their good pieces from the Northwest coast are on public view. One result is that a single visit of several hours to this gallery is not sufficient even to see the highlights. I spent a full week in the gallery and to the end of my visit, I still kept finding great pieces I had not noticed before.

The labelling in the exhibition is also exhausting. Many tens of thousands of words of text confront the visitor, silkscreened in relatively small letters onto red cedar panels. Correcting or changing labels will undoubtedly challenge the patience of the exhibition staff.

Among the most successful aspects of the display are the life-size dioramas in both the Eskimo and Northwest Coast Indian sections. The Northwest Coast dioramas include one made originally

for the St. Louis World's Fair almost eighty years ago under Boas' close supervision. In fact, this diorama of a Kwakiutl Hamatsa initiate about to jump through the doorway of a painted screen is so dramatic and riveting that it was transposed from the old gallery to the new without any significant change.

Another pair of dioramas showing the interior of the same Kwakiutl house during the secular summer season and the sacred winter cycle was especially made for the new gallery by the contemporary Kwakiutl carvers Tony and Calvin Hunt and John Livingston.

Considerably less successful was the attempt to update the visitor with video presentations of contemporary Northwest Coast Indian and Eskimo life by the use of monitors sprinkled throughout the gallery. The placement of the monitors at key areas of the circulation pattern and the inevitable hypnotic effect of the luminous screen in the otherwise dark gallery tended to draw visitors into knots that created back-up lines and blocked circulation during busy hours. The content of the video programs was excellent, however, and the exclusive use of video discs was the first outside the Ethnographic Museum in Osaka, Japan.

Organized in conjunction with the new exhibition was a major exhibition and sale of contemporary Northwest Coast and Eskimo art in an

adjacent gallery. The quality of the works on exhibit was of such a high order that the comparison of the new with the fine old masterpieces in the nearly traditional gallery was a very favourable one. Although most pieces were priced in the thousands of dollars, sales at the opening were brisk. The use of the exhibition-sales gallery was a most effective device to involve native artists in the unveiling ceremonies of the new gallery. Many artists worked extra hard knowing their works faced stiff competition from pieces by craftsmen of another time. Certain forms like painted Haida basketry and Chilcat weaving were revived for public sale for the first time this century. Two dozen artists contributed to the show, of which five were non-Natives who had apprenticed either with Bill Holm, the Northwest Coast art historian from Seattle, or with various Native artists.

Of special interest in the opening of the Maritime Peoples' exhibition was the series of Native dances and potlatch performances that culminated in the raising of a 55-foot totem pole by the Nishga carver Norman Tait. This was the first Nishga pole to be raised with proper attendant ceremonies outside of traditional Nishga territory on the Nass River of the northern coast of British Columbia. It will stand for many years to come in its commanding position in front of the Field Museum as a beacon for the public to visit the new exhibition gallery, the first in over forty years at the Field.