We have lived for hundreds of years surrounded by other nations. Yet our masks are different, our songs are different, our stories are different. These things were given to us at the beginning of time, and they have helped keep our culture alive.

—Harvey, Mack, Alvin Mack, Grace Hans, Lillian Siwallace, and Eva Mack (Nuxalk)

Sophisticated in conception and execution, and rich with symbolism, the house posts, masks, dance regalia, and elaborately decorated boxes of the North Pacific Coast have long been recognized as masterworks of art. Less well known are the unique nations whose people made, and continue to make, these beautiful things. Here, in a series of community self-portraits, representatives from eleven Native nations discuss the ways in which these masterpieces, as well as everyday tools and utensils from the museum’s collections, connect them with their forebears and enrich their world today.

The range of subjects the community curators discuss encompasses the rhythms of everyday life among the Coast Salish, the significance of whaling to the Makah, the four worlds of Nuu-chah-nulth cosmology, the sacredness and ceremony of Kwakwaka’wakw life, the Hohutik Winter Ceremonial cycle, cultural revival among the Nisg̱a’a, the spiritual unity of the Tsimshian world, Nisga’a survival and the reclamation of ancestral fisheries, concepts of wisdom and healing among the Gitxsan, Hoop dancing, and the marvellous wealth of the Tlingit.

After being on view in New York, a core collection of objects will travel to each of the eleven communities. The pieces shown here were chosen to speak both to museum visitors and to the people back home, whose ancestors made them.
The North Pacific Coast

The lands, islands, and waterways from the Olympic Peninsula and Puget Sound in the south to the Gulf of Alaska in the north, and west to the peaks and glaciers of the Coast Mountains, provide a wealth of resources. Particularly important are red and yellow cedar, which can be split into fibers and woven into cloth, as well as carved and painted, salmon, which can be dried, canned, or, more recently, frozen, for use year-round; and oil made from the oolichan—perhaps the best-known tradition of the North Pacific Coast is the potlatch. The very word “potlatch”—a Chinook jargon catchall used to describe many different feasts—was the difficulty in summarizing the region’s elaborate ceremonies. In the complex political and ceremonial life along the coast, feasts were, among other things, a way to honor modern-day achievements, such as earning a graduate degree.

Gazetteer. Literally “the strength of the people,” arises from a lineage’s history and place in the world. In ancient times, when an ancestor first acquired a territory, a cane was sometimes touched to the ground to signify the power of the lineage merging with that of the land.

— Lindsey Morris, Susan Wondler, and William White (Thompson)

We are a group of knowledge people with respect for ceremony, gracious hosts, people who honor invitations, generous with food. We are rich by measure of how much we give, not by what we gain.

— Maria Pascua, Janine Bowechop, Rebekah Monette, and Meredith Parker (Makah)

Ancestral traditions are kept alive by the nations themselves. Potlatch is an annual event in which families and communities govern themselves and maintain civility with their neighbors. By reciting histories, chiefs stated their houses’ rights and honors; guests signaled their consent by accepting the host’s gifts. The host’s standing was raised by his generosity, and wealth was shared among the larger community. Potlatch ceremonies continue to this day, often hosted only by chiefs, today are given by many families, and are treasured along the North Pacific Coast. And potlatches, once treasured along the North Pacific Coast, are often hosted only by chiefs, today are given by many families, and are treasured along the North Pacific Coast. And potlatches, once treasured along the North Pacific Coast, are often hosted only by chiefs, today are given by many families, and are treasured along the North Pacific Coast.

Proprietary crests, names, dances, and songs continue to be treasured along the North Pacific Coast. And potlatches, once hosted only by chiefs, today are given by many families, and are treasured along the North Pacific Coast. And potlatches, once hosted only by chiefs, today are given by many families, and are treasured along the North Pacific Coast. And potlatches, once hosted only by chiefs, today are given by many families, and are treasured along the North Pacific Coast.

Historic narratives, formally recited at feasts, testify to the strength of their identity as sovereign peoples. They also helped to maintain relationships among neighboring communities. By reciting histories, chiefs stated their houses’ rights and honors; guests signaled their consent by accepting the host’s gifts. The host’s standing was raised by his generosity, and wealth was shared among the larger community.

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