Lower Columbia River Art

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The Lower Columbia River Valley is the focal point of the distinctive and little-known Chinookan Art Style. Chinookan art is steeped in social and religious meaning, with a focus on individual spirit powers. The Chinookan Art Style, which appears in the utilitarian objects of material culture, uses geometric shapes as elaboration and in representational figures, while employing a unique perspective on human and animal forms, here termed Chinookan Anatomical Art.

Although the focal area of the Chinookan Art Style was the string of Chinookan villages from the mouth of the Columbia River to just above The Dalles in present-day Oregon, the style was found over a much wider region that roughly corresponds to the Greater Lower Columbia River region (Hajda 1984) and was created by peoples other than Chinookans. Here, we will concentrate on artwork that was created between Astoria, Oregon, and The Cascades, about 130 miles upriver. Upriver Chinookan pieces from the Columbia River Gorge and The Dalles, however, are essential for comparison and for defining the parameters of the larger style.

Within the Chinookan Art Style there is a continuum of variations along the river and important relationships with other regions. Chinookan Style clearly influenced the art of people who lived in the larger region, and comparisons can be made among them. The wood, bone, and stone art of the Lower Columbia is markedly similar in both form and function to that of the Salishan people of western Oregon and Washington, and to a lesser extent southern British Columbia. Chinookan Art Style objects have been collected from locations in the Pacific Northwest that are well outside the area of influence of its people’s art. Without provenance, it is often impossible to deter-
mine the area of manufacture for these pieces except to say that they originate from the Greater Lower Columbia River.

ATTRIBUTES OF THE CHINOOKAN ART STYLE

The distribution of Chinookan Art Style pieces at contact demonstrates an indigenous interest in collecting and owning these objects. Early fur traders continued this interest, and Chinookan art objects exist in private collections and museums worldwide. Today, individuals and institutions are again recognizing the value in this compelling style, and a growing number of artists are working to perpetuate it.

*The style takes advantage of an incredible range of materials.* It is clear that Columbia River Chinookans (and their neighbors) were compelled to produce it. Carving, both two-dimensional and three-dimensional, was primary, and painting was secondary, although some items received elaborate applica-
tions of paint. The distribution of artifacts made from wood, stone, bone, horn, and antler implies that availability was a significant factor in determining what material was used.

Lacking abundant sources of suitable wood, the people of The Dalles emphasized stone, bone, and horn, while those nearer the mouth of the Columbia found wood more readily available. Whalebone clubs and adzes came from the coast, while mountain sheep horn bowls and ladles came from the interior; both were traded widely from their source areas. Heavily used woods included the easily worked western red cedar for larger pieces and the harder alder, maple, ash, and yew for smaller items and containers (Ray 1938:131). Bone and elk antlers, which lend themselves to fine work, were used for figurines, effigies, adzes, wedges, pins, and awls. Around Lake River, effigies were often modeled in clay—sometimes fired, sometimes not. Worked stone pieces included materials from pumice to Columbia River basalt (Petersen 1978). Woodcarving tools were made of local stone and beaver incisors, while jadeite was acquired from sources in the Fraser River valley.

Basketry materials included sweetgrass sedge, cattail, hazel shoots, spruce root, red cedar bark and root, Indian hemp, and rushes. Beargrass, slough sedge, cedar bark, and eelgrass were typical items used for designs. A variety of dyes was applied to the sedges, beargrass, and cedar bark, while white to golden beargrass and black eelgrass were also used. Red and yellow were the most typical dyes seen on basketry; supplemented with the natural blacks, browns, and whites of the base material, the baskets were very colorful. Paint colors were typically red and black, with yellow, blue, green, and white also used.

**Chinookan Style Art does not often stand alone.** Typically, it can be seen as decoration or adornment of material objects, including adzes, bark shredders, baskets, bows, bowls, bunk rails, burial canoe uprights, canoes, clubs, combs, cradles, cups, digging stick handles, house posts, ladles, mat creasers, mortars and pestles, pins, pipes, “slave killers,” and spoons. The most notable examples of stand-alone pieces are made of stone, clay, and antler. Scale was determined by the object being decorated, and forms within the art were often derived from the materials themselves. The art can be extremely small in scale, at times nearly microscopic (Figure 10.2). Most decorated surfaces are rounded, not flat. Architectural carvings—where flat, split cedar planks are the typical material—are exceptions and are also exceptional in terms of scale.

**Basic geometric shapes, appearing as either raised or incised elements, are**
the backbone of the style. Concentric geometric shapes and bands of interlocking positive zigzags are typical and often help define larger positive background spaces. They also appear integrally in anthropomorphic and zoomorphic imagery. The primary shapes are circles, triangles, rectangles, constricted rectangles (hourglass), squares, diamonds, crescents, almond shapes, pie shapes, and parallel and perpendicular lines. The word “geometry” is misleading, and it may be most appropriate to refer to this attribute of the art as “organic geometry.” The artists were wholly aware of both positive and negative space and used both to develop forms. This concern over positive and negative is expressed by carving, incising the form of the objects themselves, and piercing.

Lower Columbia Art involves both zoomorphic and anthropomorphic figures and is strongly influenced by an aboriginal perspective of anatomy. Bodies are geometricized, and faces are composed of planes applied to geometric shapes such as diamonds, circles, and octagons. Observers often have noted the “skeletal” or “x-ray” attributes of the art. Figures often have overlapping
body parts and extremities, while some lack key parts of anatomy altogether. Our use of the term Chinookan Anatomical Art is new.

*Chinookan Art is dynamic.* Its ability to combine flowing and diminishing lines, combined with the tension of geometric shapes interacting with each other and bold anthropomorphic and zoomorphic images in a single composition, adds to the inherent strength and unusual qualities of the artworks. The forms have genuine concern for each other and build tension by flowing into or rebounding off each other. The negative spaces created within the compositions are essential.

*Chinookan Art is spiritually loaded.* Images often represent spirits in human or animal form or both. Some are recognizable, while others are ambiguous and unfamiliar from a non-Native perspective. Many images, like Coyote, have their origins in regional mythology, while many are clearly veiled representations of their owner’s spirit power(s). Numerical sequences, a significant concern in Chinookan lifeways and mythology, are evident in the style as well. The number five has great significance, and element sequences of three and, more typically, five are evident. Double imagery is also present, with forms being seen as different based on the viewer’s perspective. Often these appear to be transformational type images that likely also represent personal spiritual experiences or the transformation of myth characters.

**GEOMETRIC SHAPES**

Mountain sheep horn bowls (Figure 10.3) often exemplify how geometric forms are used in complex compositions. Triangles are most often seen in interlocking patterns, where they create positive zigzag lines. Circles, rectangles, squares, diamonds, and their concentric versions are found both independently and representing “body parts.” Crescents and repeating crescents function similarly. Geometricized body parts usually include “organs,” leg and arm joints, ribs as well as heads, and their associated features. Almond shapes most often appear in the context of heads and eyes, as well as animal forms, although they can stand alone. Pie shapes are usually seen as negative space defining positive imagery, and constricted rectangles are found as independent negative images. Robin Wright (1991) notes the similarity of the constricted rectangle shape to net gauges of the region.

These elements can appear with as little as a row of interlocking triangles, forming a positive zigzag on the belly of a bow, or in an intricate use of space decorating the entirety of a horn bowl’s complex surface. Typically, a combi-
nation of shapes creates a complete composition, and designs can exist with or without zoomorphic or anthropomorphic imagery. A great deal of tension is generated in the art by the flowing and diminishing lines generated through these shapes and their interaction.

Chinookan basketry uses similar shapes and proportions. Triangles that form positive zigzags (Figure 10-4) are extremely common in the basketry west of the Portland Basin (see Crawford 1983:57–63). Anthropomorphic imagery, especially east of the Portland Basin, shows the same concern for anatomy typical in carving. Negative shapes may be formed by piercing, whether defining the attributes of an animal or human or simply piercing an object. Again relevant is the number of piercings seen on each individual piece. The numbers three and five are prevalent, with five being dominant.

LOWER COLUMBIA ANATOMICAL ART NO. 1: HUMAN FACES

Three main face types occur in the Chinookan Art Style: three-plane, two-plane, and the so-called tsagiglalal style. The human face is typically broken
Clatsop basket, mid-19th century, sweetgrass sedge, beargrass, and eel grass, 6 inches x 11.5 inches x 3 inches. This uniquely shaped Clatsop basket features geometric and zoomorphic imagery typical of the westernmost Chinookans and their neighbors. (Courtesy of the Hallie Ford Museum of Art, Willamette University, Salem, Oregon, gift of Richard D. Slater)

into planes, with a strong nose and brow ridge. The nose is almost always long, thin, and straight, terminating at the brow ridge. Faces are usually circular, though they also can assume other shapes, such as elongated ovals, triangles, diamonds, and octagons. Many recall the head-flattening tradition of the Greater Lower Columbia, either showing a strongly pushed-back forehead plane or, in the tsagiglalal type, elongating or squeezing the entire head. Details of hair and headdresses are usually present. The style’s approach to the human face is relatively flat. Deeper, more three-dimensional carving is typical in stone and also possible in wood.

Tsagiglalal

The tsagiglalal type is named for the most famous image of this type, a photograph near Old Wishram village, upriver from The Dalles on the north shore of the Columbia. Tsagiglalal, commonly known as “she-who-watches,” is most associated with the easternmost Chinookan villages.

Tsagiglalal-type images should not be mistaken as representing the character tsagiglalal. Instead, they should be understood as a convention for representing the “human” face, primarily by easternmost Chinookans. When archaeologist B. Robert Butler (1965) showed an image of this type to an Upper Chinook (Wishram) woman, he got this response:

I showed ... a Wishram woman who was considered to be knowledgeable about “the old ways” ... [a small tsagiglalal style] piece. She threw her hands over her eyes in great alarm and asked me to put it away. ... She said that the carving was Tsi’La, ‘watersnake,’ a very powerful guardian spirit. She implied that Tsi’La was a very dangerous guardian spirit. I specifically questioned her about the grinning face motif. In reply she said, “people grin like that when they’re sick” and “when people look at you like that, you get sick.”

The Wishram woman’s reference to sickness, which likely recalls the spirit sickness that was a result of an encounter with a guardian spirit, speaks to the spiritual nature of the art.

Tsagiglalal-type figures vary immensely in size and material. A classic image of this type from Sauvie Island is a lava upright almost two feet tall (Wingert 1952:pl. 6). While the carving on a very small and remarkable pipe tamper (Figure 10.5) is typical, the tamper was carved in the round, which makes it unique among such objects. It can also be considered a fine example of double imagery. The strong flowing and diminishing lines share many superficial similarities with the Form Line Style to the north, but it is wholly representational of this type of face in the Chinookan Art Style.

The tsagiglalal face type is characterized by almond-shaped eyes and a strong brow line that arches down to define the eyes. The eyes are concentric, positive shapes defined by incising. Positive lines developed in this way typically grow and diminish. The negative incised lines and planes form “hollow” eyes, forehead, lower cheeks, and the mouth’s interior. The mouth grows from the corner of the eyes, producing a “grinning” appearance, and it most often includes a tongue or tooth. The nose flows into eyes, eyebrow, and cheek. The overall shape of the face may be perfectly round or may appear to be stretched or elongated toward the forehead; it is typically an elongated flat oval. Beyond this, there is much variation. The face may have “ears” atop its head, giving it a zoomorphic appearance; it may have a flattened head with hair parted down the middle; or it may have a headdress.
**Three-Plane Type**

This face type is characterized by clearly divided forehead, cheek, and chin planes. Each plane is recessed or pushed back into the plane above it, with a distinct step up to the next plane. Eyes and mouths are unusual, with the exceptions of power boards, house posts, and other large-scale carvings. When present, the chin plane holds the mouth, and the cheek plane holds eyes. Both mouth and eyes are often represented by incised crescent-shaped lines, although they can take numerous shapes typical to the art. Other elaborations on individual planes are possible. Occasionally, face paint or tattoo lines appear on chin or cheek planes. Most often, elaboration occurs on the forehead plane and may include explicit or hinted-at hair, headgear, hats, and so forth. The nose always terminates at the brow ridge, which can be the forehead or the brow line, and the forehead is almost always pushed back to represent head flattening. The nose may simply run into the forehead, but it usually pushes back below the forehead plane, resulting in a step up to the forehead plane. This approach to carving a human face appears to have had currency throughout the Greater Lower Columbia.
FIGURE 10.6. Burl mortar, early 19th century, maple burl, 5\(\frac{3}{8}\) inches \(\times\) 6\(\frac{1}{4}\) inches diameter. Bold anthropomorphic images on this burl mortar highlight the strong shapes associated with the art style. The obvious clavicle and hip that connect these individuals are wholly typical yet unique in their presentation as joining elements. (Courtesy of the Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon, gift of Miss Winifred Myrick, through Mrs. David L. Davies)
Classic three-plane face examples include the faces on the house post in Paul Kane's *Interior of a Lodge, Columbia River*, on the coyote and man spoon (Figure 10.1), on the mountain sheep horn bowl (Figure 10.3), and on the contemporary Cathlapotle plankhouse image (Figure 10.15).

**Two-Plane Type**

Another representation of the human face is the two-plane style, in which the cheek, chin, and mouth form one unbroken plane with the forehead and nose forming the other. As with the three-plane style, the cheek planes are recessed or pushed back into the brow ridge or forehead, and the nose terminates at the brow ridge or forehead, which can be the forehead or the brow line. The forehead is almost always pushed back to simulate head flattening. Cheeks and other aspects of facial contours are typical in this type, but no cut line or plane identifies these additional features (Figure 10.6). Unlike the three-plane style, the two-plane often has eyes and mouth represented by incised lines, although relief eyes raised above the cheek plane are also known (Figure 10.12).

**LOWER COLUMBIA ANATOMICAL ART NO. 2: THE HUMAN BODY**

The human torso is most often represented from a frontal perspective, although some profile imagery, especially in stone carving, is known. The relationship of positive and negative forms—defining sternum, clavicle, and arms—is based on human anatomy and generates a dynamic spatial intensity. Limbs are often represented as perpendicular or as growing and diminishing lines defined by incised negative space, carved geometric shapes, or piercing; they are often essential for containing the torso. Other body parts may be represented with a special emphasis on joints, ribs, and “organs.” The term “organs” is used loosely here, because objects represented inside the body can also be of an expressly spiritual nature. Two body types are typical: the true anatomical and the underdecorated.

The most common representation of the human form by Lower Columbia artists includes anatomical detail such as clavicle, sternum, ribs, pelvis (hip or belt or skirt), limbs, joints, and “organs” (Figures 10.1, 10.3, 10.5, 10.7, 10.9). A strong and often naturalistic clavicle is expected on the upper body, as is a pelvis (belt or skirt) line often parallel to it. Arms characteristically run perpendicular to these, with an often undefined termination to both. A sternum
is usual between the arms and, while terminating at the clavicle, may or may not extend to the hip line. This sets up the typical format for expressing the human torso: three more or less parallel lines (arm-sternum-arm) terminating into perpendicular lines at top (clavicle) and bottom (pelvis, belt, skirt). Within this contained space are ribs and, sometimes, “organs.” Ribs are often determined by parallel lines, chevrons, and crescents that can either be carved as planes or incised. Concentric circles, elongated ovals, almond shapes, and others typical of the art represent “organs” within this space as well. Limbs often show joints at shoulder, elbow, and knee; they may be represented as simple protrusions but often are formed by concentric circles, squares, or elongated rectangles. Hands and feet are not usual, although positive shapes may hint at their presence. Most often, limbs simply terminate into another positive line, such as the belt line.

The underdecorated type of representation is defined by strong positive shapes that lack recognizable anatomy beyond the basics: typically clavicle, arms, and pelvis. These are defined by pierced negative lines or geometric shapes that often are recessed. Contour may hint to anatomy other than the torso itself, but recognizable parts defined by incised or otherwise carved negative space are rare. Like the true anatomical type, limbs usually start at the shoulder and end at the “belt” line (Figure 10.6).

A unique medium for Columbia River Art is fired clay, represented by the well-known “Shoto clay” figures (Figure 10.7). These are most often anthropomorphic figures that, as a subgroup, are mostly simplified and sometimes

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*Figure 10.7. Shoto clay images. These images are rife with elements of the style. (Courtesy of the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture, Seattle, Washington)*

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even crude. The body, when represented, often is simply defined by incised lines and, at times, as a primary shape. Features are sometimes only roughly indicated and eyes are slits, although more typical representations of faces and body parts also are possible.

Shoto images also often hint at head flattening, hairstyle, and head gear or headdresses. The use of patterns in the clay can define negative and positive space. Wilbert (2010) examined a collection at the Burke Museum in Seattle and concluded that the designs and motifs on the clay were local and present on other media. These are the only fired clay figurines on the Northwest Coast or in the broader region, and they do not appear to have been made after contact.

LOWER COLUMBIA ANATOMICAL ART NO. 3: ANIMAL FIGURES

Animals may or may not be recognizable in the art. These representations are typically naturalistic but rely on geometry and strong positive and negative shapes to define them. Certain favored species tend to cluster in different media—for example, coyote, bears, and birds in wood; “dogs” and cervids in basketry; and salamanders, owls, beavers, and seals in stone. Many of the figures are depictions of spirit helpers.

Anatomical features are the focus. Multiple images, zoomorphic-zoomorphic or zoomorphic-anthropomorphic (Figure 10.5), may be combined, and it is often unclear where one individual ends and another begins. Numerous images may appear together, and details are often reduced to the point of lacking eyes, mouths, and other small details. Applied images are typically found standing atop handles or on a platform seemingly built for their use (Figure 10.8). Piercing is typical, and negative spaces are almost always concerned with the primary shapes of the art. The zoomorphs are compact, which allowed the artist to take advantage of the limitations of the material in which they are carved (Brown 1998).

Anthropomorphic images tend to have strong positive forms that define legs joined with hips or shoulders (Figure 10.1). This is clearly related, as a design sensibility, to the most common representation of human bodies, focused on the strong positive clavicle and hip elements that are joined by strong perpendicular elements of arms, sternum, and legs. In zoomorphs, we call these strong positive elements “hip-leg forms” and “shoulder-leg forms.” In Figure 10.1, for example, the coyote’s head is mounted on the front of the
FIGURE 10.8. Sheep horn ladle, mid-19th century, mountain sheep horn, 8¼ inches × 4½ inches × 5½ inches. This finely carved Chinookan ladle is a master work of the Chinookan Art Style. (Courtesy of the National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, #E701-o, collected by George Gibbs, received 1862)

shoulder-leg form from a protruding neck that is a continuation of the body; the tail is likewise mounted on the rear of the hip-leg form. Birds will typically include a single hip-leg form. This form, when viewed from the front, creates a planklike platform, or plane, on which the head is mounted. This mounting of the head onto a flat surface can be seen in anthropomorphic and zoomorphic images on items such as power boards, house posts, image canoes, and spoons.

Bone and Antler Objects

A primary medium of the Chinookan Art Style is bone and antler, which allow for a tremendous amount of detail. Some of the best-known pieces have been produced in these materials, and it is clear that they have been a favorite material of artists for a very long time. Stand-alone objects include the well-known Sauvie Island woman and child at the Burke Museum. The straight adze, the primary woodworking tool of the style, had handles usually manufactured from elk antler or whale bone and was often highly decorated. Other

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decorated items carved from bone and antler were pins, awls, amulets, and gaming pieces.

Sheep Horn Bowls and Ladles

The carving and manipulation of the horn of bighorn sheep (mountain sheep) border on the miraculous. The transformation from raw horn to bowl (Figure 10.3) or ladle (Figure 10.8) is an extremely complex and time-consuming process, involving long periods of soaking, boiling, and/or steaming along with carving, shaping, and thinning. Once complete, these vessels are extremely durable, and examples can be assumed to have survived generations. Based on the wear and patina on many of the objects, it is clear that such objects were not always destroyed or sent with their owners into the afterlife. Some have been found in graves and show obvious signs of having been “killed,” but there are numerous examples that exhibit a level of wear far beyond a human life span.

Sheep horn is a material that allows for a great deal of detail and, once shaped, is easily carved. Its resistance to splitting and breaking allows for zoomorphs that are often carved more finely than most wood species allow (Figure 10.8). The material is particularly well suited for chip carving, and there are numerous examples of fine detailed geometric decoration over the majority of a bowl’s surface area. While ladles are often highly decorated, they usually do not have the quantity of decoration seen on bowls. Ladles are also most typically decorated with zoomorphs that are carved to perch or stand on the end of the handle. They can be carved integrally to the handle or stand on what often seems to be a surface expressly for that purpose. Bowls almost always have “ears”—raised projections on two sides that rise above the rim of the bowl. These are a product of the bowls’ manufacture and are most often pierced and sometimes highly decorated. Anthropomorphs, especially faces, are most often represented on bowls.

Wooden Spoons

Chinookan-style spoons are typically carved with a bowl and an integral handle that is attached either at the rim on the back of the bowl or partway down the bowl’s back. At times, handles can consist entirely of an anthropomorphic or zoomorphic image or both (Figure 10.1); at others, they include a “perch” upon which the image stands or is mounted. The bowls of spoons are usually
carved to a canoelike form, which suggests that it was steamed and bent to expand the size of the spoon’s bowl (like a canoe or sheep horn bowl or ladle).

Painted Objects

With the exception of pictographs, which are most common in eastern Chinookan territory and highlight the flat design associated with the Chinookan Art Style, stand-alone painted objects are rare. One example of a two-dimensional painted object is a spectacular clam on, or elk-hide armor (Figure 10.9), in the collections of the Field Museum in Chicago; it is the only known surviving example in Columbia River Style. Clam ons, which were commonly mentioned in the historical literature, were made of elk hide and traded...
north—in the early contact era, by Euro-American traders—where they were used in intertribal warfare. Alexander Ross (2000) described them this way: "of elk-skin, dressed and worked to the thickness of nearly half an inch, and arrow-proof. The claval nearly covers the whole body, with an opening left on the right side to allow the arm free action in combat" (89). So few examples of painted images exist that it is impossible to say how typical the image on the clamon is. It is clear, though, because of its provenance and the form of the imagery associated with it, that it is from the Lower Columbia. The focus on anatomy, the "planed" faces, and the concentrics place it firmly in the Chinookan Art Style.

STONE SCULPTURE

The level of detail in Chinookan stone sculpture varies by the material used and the intent of the artists. Some materials, such as basalt, do not lend themselves to a high degree of detail; others, like pumice and soapstone, are readily carved and can exhibit a great deal of detail. While pumice objects carved in the style can be highly detailed, they are more commonly quite simple. Some of the most intricately carved items are in soapstone and take the form of tubular pipes. These pipes, some long and thin, some stout and short, are sometimes very detailed. Often, zoomorphs stand asymmetrically on the side of these pipes, while others are embellished with geometric shapes.

Lower Columbia stone sculpture emphasizes both zoomorphs (Figures 10.11, 10.12) and anthropomorphs (Figure 10.7). Two varieties of anthropomorphic stone sculpture are common: stone bowls with human faces and upright figures. Numerous stone bowls were made on the Columbia River for utilitarian purposes. These can be finely shaped, deep vessels, but Columbia River bowls that appear to be integral to zoomorphic or anthropomorphic imagery are generally shallow. The function of these bowls is not always known. "Human" face-type bowls typically range from 5 to 12 inches high and seem to have been more prevalent in eastern Chinookan territory near The Dalles. While humanlike, they may represent any number of creatures—human, supernatural, and otherwise.

The exceptional 22.5-inch-high zoomorphic upright from Sauvie Island (Figure 10.11) exhibits aspects of double imagery and is a fine example of classic Chinookan stone art (Wingert 1952:pl. 5). Viewed from above, the object is clearly an animal. The spine with three shallow bowls is obvious, with ribs extending from both sides and shoulders reminiscent of the clavicle ground
FIGURE 10.10. Salamander bowl, precontact, basalt. Objects of the type of this fully carved and quite lifelike stone salamander “bowl” have often been misidentified as “beaver.” While zoomorphic carvings are primarily ambiguous, the prominence of salamander and newt in the Greater Columbia River’s mythology likely explains the frequency of these images within the art. (Courtesy of the Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon)

FIGURE 10.11. Zoomorphic object, 22 1/2 inches, w. 13 3/4 inches. A unique perspective of typical Chinookan Art Style forms is seen on this large zoomorphic object. (Courtesy of the Oregon Historical Society, Portland, #bbo10115)
the outstretched arms to the body. The “claws” are somewhat unusual, and a nose ridge is present, but no brow. The round eyes are characteristic of the style, and the mouth and presumed teeth are clear, setting the direction of the face (looking up). The cheek line, however, can double as a brow ridge and creates a distinctly human face when considered from another perspective. It is likely that this piece was mounted upright in the ground.

**Upright Figures**

Overlapping with the last class are large upright figures, often with shallow bowls in the top. Significant examples come from both Sauvie Island and The Dalles, with a size range of from several inches to over four feet tall. In 1841, Hudson’s Bay Company Governor George Simpson (1968) described the Sauvie stone: “a block of black basalt, rudely chiseled by the Indians of ancient days into a column of four feet in height and three feet in diameter” (175). Touching the stone was supposed to cause rain. This is likely the upright sculpture now owned by the Portland Art Museum (Figure 10.12) (Mercer 2005; 20).

In 1856, George Gibbs (1955–56) described the Multnomah stone as one of a type of "weather stone":

Yahotowit, an intelligent Klikitat, stated that the Multnomah stone was not the only one that produced rain. There are a great many in different places. They were a race of Skookums (Chinuk Wawa: monster or powerful spirits) who have been changed to stone, and if anyone sits down upon them, as a squaw when gathering berries, it speedily rained. (311)

Gibbs also listed several other weather stones in the area.

Other Stone Pieces

There are numerous examples of large zoomorphs carved in the Chinookan Art Style. Some are fully carved and include the shallow bowls typically seen in the area. One carving, reminiscent of the Pacific giant salamander (Figure 10.10), is unusual for being fully carved and for its lifelike appearance, while others are embellishments on naturally shaped stone, some of which are carved in place while others are portable. These large stone carvings were often ambiguous, although some clearly represented spirit powers. Guardian spirits were never to be identified outright, although a knowledgeable observer might recognize hints regarding the nature of the power. Others personified local stories and were meant to educate or warn viewers.

Large-Scale Carving: What the Explorers Saw

Most of the wood art pieces from the Lower Columbia have not survived due to time, conditions that are not conducive to the preservation of wood, and the cultural practice of “killing” or burning items owned by individuals at death. In the 1890s, for example, when Willapa Bay resident Mary Armstrong Riddell (Satsop) died, she had a huge canoe, about forty feet long, housed in a split cedar shake shed located above high tide. Some of her possessions were put in the canoe all was burned in ceremonial fashion. She was buried in the Bay Center cemetery, and as the grave was filled with Earth, Captain Jim Huckquist (Lower Chinook), who was married to her sister, Susan, threw in her beads and other trinkets. (Wiegardt Perrow 1971)
Canoes often were used as burial canoes, and power boards were used to support them. Killed items, which typically was done by punching holes into them, were placed with the body. Canoes used as burial canoes also were pierced to ceremonially “kill” them and for the practical purpose of allowing drainage.

Museum collections hold some of these “killed” objects, as they were favorites of early grave robbers. Many Chinookan Art Style pieces also exist in tribal communities. More undoubtedly will see the light of day, but much of what once existed on the Columbia River was recorded only in the minds of elders and the descriptions of early explorers.

House Posts

Like their neighbors to the north, Lower Columbia peoples often carved posts and planks inside their lodges with anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures. Many early explorers mentioned this practice. In 1814, at Chinook village, Alexander Henry (1992:613) passed between the legs of a “large rudely carved figure of a man” just inside the door of a Native lodge. At The Cascades, he reported that bed planks and interior partitions were “carved and painted [with] uncouth figures of eagles, tortoises, and other animals” (Henry 1992:630). In late March 1806, at Kathlamet village, Meriwether Lewis reported:

these people are very fond of sculpture in wood of which they exhibit a variety of specimens about their houses. The broad pieces supporting the center of the roof and those through which the doors are cut, seem to be the pieces on which they most display their taste. I saw some of these which represented human figures setting and supporting the burden on their shoulders. (Lewis and Clark, 1991:9-10)

Power Boards and Power Figures

Power boards and power sticks represented items infused with the power of a person’s personal guardian spirit, and both were used in guardian spirit and shamanistic ceremonies. For Portland Basin Chinookans, we have Paul Kane’s depiction of a spirit board; for the river-mouth Chinooks, there are two near-contemporaneous descriptions from the lodge of Chenamus (Concomly’s son) at a Chinook village. In 1836, John Townsend (1999) wrote: “In almost
every house there is a large figure, or idol, rudely carved and painted upon a board, and occupying a conspicuous place” (253). The best description comes from an unpublished journal from the 1839 Belcher expedition:

we found the chief seated “a la torque” [legs crossed] on a mat placed on an elevated platform at the extremity of the building. . . . Behind the seat of the chief was a black board painted red with a slight relief of coloured rings; and again behind this, forming the extremity of the house was a gigantic figure of red and black with long arms and five projecting ribs. A triangular red face, and horizontal figure-of-eight eyes; they pointed upwards to explain its medium. Two others of smaller size were stationed opposite to each other at the sides. (Hinds 1836–42)

George Gibbs (1955–56) recorded in the 1850s that, following the adolescent spirit quest at Willapa Bay, “an early task was to represent his tamahnous [guardian spirit] in some suitable form, as by painting or carving upon a board. This device was placed in some conspicuous situation in the lodge during the life of the owner, after his death near his grave” (127). An exceptional example of this type of power board was collected and photographed at Bay Center in 1898. It is currently housed at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City.

Power figures are mentioned in the historical record in three contexts: in the rear of the lodge near the chief’s bed (like power boards), in shamanistic ceremonies, and at gravesites. Hinds (1836–40) saw what were certainly power figures on three sides of the chief’s platform at the back of the house; and at The Cascades, Henry (1992:649) recorded four two-feet-high crowned figures and “two large painted stones” around the chief’s bed.

Artists Alfred Agate (1841) and Paul Kane (1847) drew the interior of Chinookan lodges, showing house posts carved in anthropomorphic fashion. A modern example exists in the reconstructed Cathlapotle longhouse in the Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge north of Vancouver, Washington. Both Kane’s and Agate’s paintings illustrate the significant aspects of Chinookan monumental sculpture. Geometric (Agate) and geometric and zoomorphic (Kane) bunk rails can be clearly seen lining the walls. Anthropomorphic images are seen in both images on the rear house posts. A power board rests at the end of the sleeping bunk on the left of the Kane image. While not presented in detail, it clearly includes an anthropomorphic spirit figure.
"Image Canoe" Carvings

There were several types of Lower Columbia canoes, separable by form and function (see Boyd 1996:61). As with northern canoes, painting, carving, and inlay were forms of adornment. A special class of Chinookan canoes, which became known as “image canoes,” had carvings that were of a scale unrivaled on the Northwest Coast. There were two primary types: cutwater, with a near perpendicular bow that had an image mounted on a platform carved on it, and double image, with a near perpendicular bow and stern and images on both ends.

For cutwater images, Alexander Ross (2000:98) noted a man or a “white-headed eagle” on the bow, and Alexander Henry (1992) described a Clatsop chief’s war canoe as having a “carved figure of a carnivorous animal with large ears erect, and arms & legs clinging to the upper extremities ... grinning most horribly. ... The large ears are painted green, other parts red and black” (679).

On November 4, 1805, on the Columbia near what is now Portland International Airport, Lewis and Clark (1990) met “a large Canoe . . . ornamented with Images carved in wood the figures of <man &> a Bear in front & a man in Stern, Painted & fixed very neatly on the <bow & Stern> of the Canoe, rising to near the hight of a man” (18). The explorers called the place Image Canoe Island (now Hayden Island). On February 1, 1806, below The Cascades, Lewis described others:

some of them particularly on the sea coast are waxed painted and orni-
mented with curious images at bough and Stern; those images sometimes
rise to the hight of five feet; the pedestals on which these images are fixed
are sometimes cut out of the solid stick with the canoe, and the imagery is
formed of separate small pieces of timber firmly united with tenants and
motives without the assistance of a single spike of any kind. ... their images
are representations of a great variety of grotesque figures. (Lewis and Clark
1990:263, 265)

Two sketches in the Lewis and Clark journals depict a man on the bow and
either a bird or bear on the stern. An exceptional double-image canoe model
(Figure 10.13) at the American Museum of Natural History has a bird on its
bow and an apparent bear on its stern.
FIGURE 10.13. Double-ended image canoe. This rare example of a double-ended image canoe is one of the true master works of the Chinookan Art Style. (Courtesy of the Division of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History. Lower Columbia River canoe catalog number 16.1/1786 A)

ARCHAEOLOGY

The small sample of artifacts from controlled archaeological excavations includes stone sculpture, carved bone and antler objects, and clay objects. Rock art, both petroglyphs and pictographs, is plentiful in and above the Columbia River Gorge (e.g., Keyser 1992), but some have been found on the Lower Columbia. The most famous is Tsagiglalal (She Who Watches), which overlooks the upstream end of the Columbia River Narrows, a major fishing and trading locality.

Also rare in the archaeological sample is basketry and carved and worked wood. Conditions in most sites on the lower river are such that these items do not preserve. Recent work at a waterlogged site on Sauvie Island in the Wapato Valley (Croes et al. 2009), however, demonstrates that there are sites with the right conditions in the Lower Columbia, so we may anticipate the recovery of such items.

On the Northwest Coast, objects carrying design elements date to as early as 3000 BC (Ames and Maschner 1999). The earliest in the Lower Columbia region, recovered from the Palmrose site in Seaside, Oregon, date to between 800 BC and AD 300. Only a few of the large number of carved antler and bone objects at Palmrose have been studied or described (Connolly 1992), but it is clear that the Chinookan Art Style was well established by this time. Ames...
and Maschner (1999) found resemblances between the Palmrose objects and contemporary art in southern British Columbia and also with much later art objects on the lower river. One zoomorph, for example, is an owl form, historically one of the common animal figures of the Chinookan Art Style.

Excavations at the Meier and Cathlapotle sites in the Wapato Valley produced small samples of design-bearing objects dating between about AD 1400 and 1840. Most of these are of bone and antler, while a few are of stone or pumice. Most of the bone and antler appear to be pendent fragments. One, from Meier, carries a series of triangular forms that might represent houses but that are similar to basketry motifs. A charred fragment from a hearth at Cathlapotle exhibits deeply carved form lines in an abstract design. Stone sculpture at both sites was limited to a few bowls, zoomorphic mauls and pestles, and two anthropomorphic faces carved in pumice. The Meier artifact is elaborate, with faces carved on both sides. The two Meier faces, of the three-plane type, differ somewhat in that they have large eyes and open mouths; the two sides, however, are not identical. The Cathlapotle example is much simpler and smaller and does not fit into either the three- or two-plane category. It is also of pumice but is almost sketchlike in its simplicity. The Meier and Cathlapotle artifacts were recovered in similar contexts, at the rear of houses. Those sites also yielded fragments of pumice bowls with incised geometric designs.
FIGURE 10.15. Wealth post, Cathlapotle plankhouse. The final “wealth” post at the Cathlapotle plankhouse in Ridgefield, Washington, is seen here during construction. The post was designed by Tony A. Johnson and primarily carved by Adam McIsaac. (Courtesy of Adam McIsaac, photographer)
Neither site produced the large anthropomorphic or zoomorphic sculpture for which the Lower Columbia is known (e.g., Wingert 1952). The only such sculpture that may be in its original exterior location is the large “beaver bowl” on Fisher’s Landing (Keyser et al. 2006). Peterson (1978) inventoried Lower Columbia River art, describing and illustrating a large number of smaller sculptures, including bowls. Most originated in the Columbia River Gorge, but a few were collected in the Wapato Valley. Many may have been taken from graves.

The tradition of art on the Lower Columbia experienced a precipitous decline with the introduction of alien diseases in the late 1700s. Many artists and craftsmen and women with specialized knowledge died, taking their skills with them. The Indian Shaker Church and Christianity led to the decline of spirit beliefs and the substitution of white for Native technology, which also contributed to a decline in traditional art. Looting and the Native American artifact trade resulted in many surviving pieces being dispersed and lost to the public (Butler 2007).

Despite this long decline, Chinookan Style Art is finally taking its rightful place in the communities of its origin. Today, large installations and individual pieces can be seen in art galleries, public parks, and buildings and homes.