

ARCTIC AND SUBARCTIC

The word agayu means "to pray." . . . In the old times that term seems to have been used during the dances, especially the mask ceremony. It is a time of praying, hoping for things to be. People honoring the person or the animal are praying for things to come . . . [Dancing, singing, and masking were] our way of making prayer.

—Elise Mather, Yup'ik, 1994

The ceremonial masked dances of Alaska's Central Yup'ik honor and express gratitude to animals' spirits or souls (*yua* or *inua*) and petition animals to be plentiful during the coming year. Such ceremonies—held during the frigid, dark winter months when hunting and fishing are impossible—reveal the fundamental relationships of respect and reciprocity that bind humans and animals together to perpetuate life.

The Arctic cultural area encompasses 5,000 miles along the shoreline of northern Alaska, Canada, and Greenland. Beyond the northern tree line is a land of rolling tundra with a few mountain peaks. Winters are long and severe, and the subsoil remains frozen even during the short summers. The

western Sub-Arctic includes both the tundra and the northern evergreen forest. It is a land of freshwater lakes, bogs, and rivers. Even today, people depend on fishing and hunting for sustenance.

The Arctic cultures have strong aesthetic traditions. The elaborate masking tradition of the Central Yup'ik people focuses on the spiritual quest of the hunt. Their respectful attitude toward the natural world informs not only their masked dances but also the ornamentation they bestow on clothing and implements. These decorations are intended to please animal spirits and induce them to offer themselves during the hunting season.

CALIFORNIA AND THE GREAT BASIN

So many Pomo baskets . . . have stories, songs, and genealogies. They have helped us on our travels and told us who we are as a people. They have healed the sick and forecast momentous events . . . And the baskets keep talking.

—Greg Sarris, Pomo/Miwok-European, 1993

Baskets play the protagonists in California and Great Basin traditional stories. In one widely shared creation story, the ancestors emerge from womb-like baskets. In the lore of California's Karuk, a basket transforms into an ark-like boat to carry a person across floodwaters to safety. And, according to the Yokuts tale, Coyote—an infamous trickster—poked his head through an old basket and mocked it, so the basket choked him to death.

The California cultural area encompasses the present-day state of California and the northern part of Mexico's Baja California, a diverse and bountiful environment. An early, dense population divided into small family groups spoke more than 100 different languages. In northern California people built plank houses, while earth lodges provided shelter in the central area. Grasses, reeds, and brush were also used

as housing materials in both central and southern California.

The Great Basin is a large desert expanse encompassing Nevada, Utah, eastern California, and northern Arizona and New Mexico. Like some California Native Americans, Great Basin Native Americans also used grasses, reeds, and brush for constructing their houses.

Basketry has been an integral part of daily life for the Native peoples of California and the Great Basin since ancient times. Baskets mean life, and for centuries they were central to many of life's basic activities, from food gathering, storage, and preparation, to games and ceremonies.

As travelers flooded west in the late 1800s, Native women turned their formidable weaving skills toward feeding a curio trade hungry for handmade objects that were both beautiful and useful. By the early 1900s, the market stimulated a great flowering of Native innovation and virtuosity, and the region became synonymous with fine basketry.

NORTHWEST COAST

Each piece records . . . a historical and spiritual event; each piece of visual art is associated with songs that can be heard, dances that can be seen, and spirits that are neither seen nor heard except as they are manifested in the performance at hand.

—Nora Marks Dauenhauer, Tlingit poet and scholar, 1995

"At.óow is our life," said Emma Marks, a modern Tlingit artist. Pronounced "utt-ou" (rhymes with "cut two,") at.óow means "something you own" and includes visual arts, stories, and songs about ancestors' exploits or episodes from traditional stories. When presented at public rituals known as potlatches, these things symphonically narrate the historical and spiritual events central to Tlingit culture. For the Northwest Coast people, the visual arts without their stories are like a movie without a soundtrack, according to the Tlingit poet and scholar Nora Marks Dauenhauer.

The people of the Northwest Coast live in a region extending over 2,000 miles along the northern Pacific coastline. The area begins in Oregon and continues north through Washington and British Columbia to southeastern Alaska. It is a

temperate region of high rainfall with islands and coastal inlets, dense forests, and snow-capped barrier mountains.

The Northwest Coast has produced many masterful artists and continues to do so. Inherited stories and images, known as crests, are inseparable. They are crucial to explaining how privileges and rights—to social titles, land, and fishing or hunting grounds—came into the hands of important families through marriage or war, or from spirits in the remote past. Thus, Northwest Coast art plays a key role in upholding the social and political order.

Carving in this region often has a monumental and dramatic quality, regardless of size. Historically, carvers used wood, stone, horn, and ivory to make colorful works ranging from small pipe bowls and masks to towering totem poles. Female artists produced beautiful woven textiles, beaded attire, and baskets. To this day, the potlatch tradition of elaborate feasting and gift giving fuels a great deal of the artistic activity.

GREAT PLAINS

*Something sacred wears me,
All behold me coming.*

—Lakota song

For centuries, beautiful garments and ornate objects have held great meaning for Plains people. A human wears a powerful garment that is protected by the sacred forces within its materials and imagery. The same is true of many other objects.

The people of the Plains, Prairie, and Plateau regions live in an area defined by the Mississippi Valley to the east and the Rocky Mountains to the west; Manitoba and Saskatchewan to the north, and the Mexican border of Texas to the south. The Plains are vast grasslands with occasional hills and forested enclaves in the river valleys.

As many do today, Native artists historically decorated clothing and containers, embroidering them with porcupine quills or glass trade beads, and made carvings in wood, horn, and stone. Guilds of initiated women created sacred quillwork and beadwork designs on cradles and clothing. Membership in these guilds was limited and strictly

regulated, indicating great expertise and conferring high status.

A warrior, dressed in a shirt of antelope skin, hopes for that animal's swiftness in combat. During battle, the power of his shield's ornamentation—inspired by visions that bring spiritual knowledge—helps to keep him from harm. And each of the thousands of beads that a woman patiently stitches to a child's cradle or garment is a protective prayer.

By 1700, the Plains felt the presence of Europeans. The introduction of the horse, for instance, transformed ancient ways of life by making hunting and war more effective. This newly mobile Native American provided the most pervasive European-American stereotype of the Native American: the mounted, feathered Plains warrior. By 1870, most Plains people had been forced onto reservations, and traditional life had fractured.

SOUTHWEST

Greet your Mother Earth, when you pass us on the road of life. Then you give her food and cornmeal, and then, in return, she gives you her flesh, the pieces of clay as her flesh, in order for you to reproduce something of use, a blessing.

—Josephine Nahohai, Zuni, recounting a prayer that her aunt taught her for gathering clay, 1990s

Today most Pueblo potters—so called after the towns (pueblos) in which they live—offer prayers to the Earth before digging the clay they will use to create one of the most prized craft traditions in modern Native art. These artists descend from ancestors who, more than 2,000 years ago, invented ceramics and went on to create styles that provide inspiration today. They live in the southwest cultural region that incorporates the lower parts of Utah and Colorado, all of Arizona and New Mexico, and the northern deserts of Mexico. The land is a semi-arid mix of deserts, canyons, mesas, and mountains.

Also featured in this region are works by the Diné (Navajo) and Ndee (Apache), who migrated from Sub-Arctic regions to the Southwest shortly before 1500. They adopted aspects of Pueblo religion and art but transformed and distinctively

blended them with northern traditions. Both groups excel at weaving; the Diné create textiles of exuberant vitality; the Ndee, compelling basketry. After adopting Mexican blacksmithing techniques in the late 1800s, Diné silversmiths fostered the explosion of southwestern jewelry making, which thrives today.

An annual calendar of ritual ceremonies is still practiced by these groups and represents a communal effort to ensure the continuity of life and the challenge of surviving in an area of little rain and short growing seasons.

WOODLANDS

I give feasts at which all must be eaten, I sing loudly at these feasts, I believe in my dreams—I interpret them and also the dreams of others, I consult those who have made the Light . . . Tell me, what do you find bad in all that?

—Pigarouich, Innu (Montagnais) shaman, 1637, to an early Christian missionary

In his defense of Native religion, Pigarouich alluded to beliefs commonly held by many of the otherwise diverse peoples of the Northeast—Anishinabe, Haudenosaunee, Wendat, and others. One is the belief that the universe came about through the will of the Creator linked to the sun, and that light relates to spiritual power and knowledge. In northeastern Woodlands art, shiny surfaces—oiled wood, satiny ribbon, and glossy beads—reflect this interest in luminosity. Another article of faith involved dreams and visions, sources of ultimate truth and power. Ornamentation and clothing materials expressed concepts about the universe, which many believed was energized by the epic conflict between the great spirit of the sky (Thunderbird) and the underworld spirit (Underwater Panther), both claiming dominion over the Earth's natural wealth.

The Woodland cultural area stretches from Labrador in the north to Florida in the south, and from the Atlantic Coast in the west to the Mississippi Valley and Great Lakes region in the east. The great deciduous forests of eastern North America were the primary resources and inspiration for the exceptional woodcarvings and baskets made by Woodlands cultures. After contact with Europeans, Woodlands artists incorporated trade goods such as glass beads, silk ribbons, and cloth into their arts, but wood remained the fundamental artistic material.