

ABOUT HAIDA ART

On their island homeland along the Northwest Coast, the Haida fashioned a world of outstanding artistic expression, adding beauty, power and meaning to objects as simple as fish hooks and as grand as totem poles. From earliest times to the present day, the quality of their work and the creativity of their designs have caught the attention of the outside world.

The Haida artistic style has been compared to an ancient language with a visual grammar and vocabulary of animals and mythological creatures. Carved and painted on wood, stone and other materials, these figures tell a story, identify the lineage of a social group and explore philosophical ideas. In the Haida's traditional oral society, the visual arts have been a primary means of communication.

This language has been developing for at least 2,500 years along the Northwest Coast, according to the archaeological record. It has been written on cedar, alder and yew; on basalt and argillite; on woven hats and baskets. Its vocabulary is inspired by the region's diverse fauna—from killer whales and black bears to puffins and frogs—and by mythological creatures such as the seawolf Wasco and the thunderbird, whose eyes flash lightning and wings cause thunder.

The artistic representations can be naturalistic or highly abstract: a raven identified only by its large beak or a killer whale by its rounded snout and many teeth. Often, the message in the art can be understood only by those with detailed knowledge of the artist's culture.

Traditional Haida art is based on a highly sophisticated formline system, a label first applied in the 1960s by art historian Bill Holm. The system is founded on the principle that creatures can be represented by delineating their body parts and details with varyingly broad formlines that always join to create an uninterrupted grid over the designed area. Holm identified two additional design units as building blocks of compositions: the U-form and the ovoid (an oval-to-rectangular shape used primarily to portray eyes and joints).

The formline system was first and foremost a painted art. Some painting was done freehand, some with the aid of ovoid and U-form templates. The predominant colours of Haida art are black and red—black for the outline, red for the interior—complemented at times with blue-green. Holm concluded that an artist making a three-dimensional object, such as a bowl, would first conceive the design in two dimensions and then mentally “wrap” it around the three-dimensional surface before carving it out in relief.

Many contemporary Haida artists are guided and inspired by the language and techniques developed by their ancestors.