



Fashioning Tourists and Outsiders: Northwest Coast Design Trade

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Keywords: Nuu-chah-nulth, Adornment, Fashion, Tourism

When Captain Cook and his crew arrived on the West Coast of Vancouver Island in March of 1778 they did not anticipate that they would spend an entire month with the Nuu-chah-nulth people who lived there. One of their two ships needed repair, requiring an extended stay at Nootka Sound. John Webber, the artist aboard the Cook's third expedition, used this time to make elaborate drawings and watercolor paintings of Nuu-chah-nulth people, their homes, material culture and landscape. Captain Cook and crew traded brass buttons and other metals for examples of dress, ceremonial artifacts, and other trade goods, many of which are now in the collections at the British Museum (Cook & Beaglehole 1999). Long before Cook's arrival, Nuu-chah-nulth maintained extensive trade networks by land and sea with other indigenous communities along the Northwest Coast and into the Arctic and interior of what is now British Columbia. I examine this tradition of producing bodily adornments and clothing for trade with outsiders, from the 1700s through today, by looking at early examples in museum and archival collections and concluding with an ethnography of contemporary artists and designers. This research topic is relevant to the "Blending Cultures" theme of this year's ITAA conference by focusing on the ways Nuu-chah-nulth design has shifted and changed according to outside demand, particularly tourist markets past and present. Because the annual conference takes place in Vancouver, this paper will also provide ITAA membership with an opportunity to learn about the unique design aesthetic of Northwest Coast First Nations and their long history of producing and trading goods.

Research Methods

Since the fall of 2009 I have engaged in community-based ethnographic research among Nuu-chah-nulth communities along the West Coast of Vancouver Island. I have worked closely with artists and have kept field notes in addition to conducting formal interviews (video and audio-recorded) with designers and community members. I also conducted historical research that chronicles the longstanding tradition of trade and exchange of design ideas on the Northwest Coast. Museum collections typically have many 19th century objects, with some collections containing late 18th century trade goods. Collections surveyed for this research project included: British Museum, Berlin Ethnologisches Museum, Karl May Museum, Peabody Essex Museum, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Fenimore Art Museum, American Museum of Natural History, Canadian Museum of History, Museum of Anthropology at UBC, Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, and the Alberni Valley Museum. Aggregating information from the collections of selected museums provide a representative sample of Nuu-chah-nulth objects as much as is possible. However, it is important to note the limitations of museum collections: one challenge with object-based research on the topic of curio trade is that the anthropologists and collectors responsible for large institutional collections felt that they were documenting "dying cultures" and preferred to collect ceremonial artifacts used within the community, as opposed to curio and fashion items made for tourists and outsiders (Cole 1985). In order to address this limitation, I also conducted archival research at the Canadian National Archives, the Smithsonian National Anthropological Archives, Newberry Library, and the American Philosophical Society Library and Archives to examine notes of anthropologists, Edward Sapir, Philip Drucker, Susan Golla, Morris Swadesh and others who conducted research among Nuu-chah-nulth communities. Finally, I dovetailed ethnographic research with archival methods to address gaps (using oral history interviews) and to document contemporary practices.

Findings and Discussion

The earliest Nuu-chah-nulth dress and adornment artifacts currently held in museums were collected by Captain Cook, believed to be the first European to land on the west coast of Vancouver Island. His collections show that the Nuu-chah-nulth maintained extensive trade networks as Aleutian textiles and dress and Tlingit masks, armor, and hats were included in the items Nuu-chah-nulth people traded with Cook. Cook also collected items locally produced by the Nuu-chah-nulth, including cedar bark shawls with crest designs and borders of mountain goat and dog fur, masks and *uu-uutapats* (Nuu-chah-nulth whaler's hats). The practice of collecting *uu-uutapats*, *huulthin* (cedar bark shawls), and ceremonial masks carved of red and yellow cedar continued with men from the "Boston Ships" who came to make the "Golden Round" by trading for sea otter pelts that could be sold for high prices in China (Gibson 1992).

Nuu-chah-nulth people began changing their designs to target European and American markets by the mid 19th century when women began producing pika-uu (decorative basketry) (Green 2011). Merchant and cruise ships alike stopped along the coast and passengers purchased curio basketry in all shapes and forms: mats, covered bottles and abalone shells, baskets, hats, earrings, and pendants. While *uu-uutapats* hats were still made, boater hats and other popular Euro-American hat styles were produced using the *uu-uutapat* wrapped twining technique. The practice of using indigenous production techniques to make items popular for Euro-American markets continues today with cedar plaiting techniques used to make baseball caps and motor board graduation caps.

Art historians and anthropologists refer to the 1920s – 1950s as the "dark period" of Northwest Coast art, as First Nations people struggled with residential schooling, Indian hospitals and the spread of disease, and aggressive assimilationist policies adopted in Canada (Cole 1985). As legislation changed and Canada accepted multiculturalism, Northwest Coast art exploded in the 1970s and continues to play a critical role in fashioning the bodies of both tourists and Nuu-chah-nulth people alike. Particularly popular among both populations today are t-shirts, hoodies, basketry earrings, and engraved jewelry. Nuu-chah-nulth artists and designers were especially drawn to silk screen printing in the late 20th century, a technique that successfully engaged the Northwest Coast "formline" aesthetic popularized by historic crest paintings and carvings. These designs translated well onto clothing and jewelry, and the Northwest Coast giftware, apparel and jewelry industries continue to thrive today. Nuu-chah-nulth designers have embraced new technologies, while retaining traditional production techniques like wrapped twining and cedar plaiting, to produce fashions that are popular among tourists and Northwest Coast native communities alike.

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