

3. The *Naaxiin*: Robe of Sacred Honor

The islands, fjords and mountainous coastline of the Pacific Northwest area are host to more than twenty First Nation groups, speaking distinctly different languages and dialects. Out of the rugged environment and diverse population emerged a complex, stylistic and sophisticated art. Undulating formline designs wrap symmetrically around objects as grand as monumental totem poles, as simple as the elegant soapberry spoon. The designs served the ancestors of the coastal nations as an implicit language. Unlike the spoken languages that kept secrets from each neighboring tribe, this language of visual art used bold statements to be understood by all, warriors, wanderers and tradesmen, within the broad Northwest Coast range.

The language of the Pacific Northwest Coast art manifests in the exquisite *naaxiin* textiles. "*Naaxiin*" is the word used by the Haida and Tlingit for the formline designed chiefs robe now commonly referred to as "Chilkat" (Figure 3.1). The designs of *naaxiin* regalia display the identity, prestige, and power of the owner. Woven formlines of black, blue-green, and yellow create symbolic, abstract images of clan crest figures. Kinsmen as well as members of neighboring tribes are able to distinguish where that person fits within their social hierarchy. Clan membership and social position is stated by design. Women of the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian cultures weave the regalia as dictated by painted pattern boards. Men would paint the boards with images inherited by the chiefs and nobility. Ancestral privileges gained by interaction with natural phenomena and supernatural beings were recounted in stories and symbolized in crest

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designs. The *naaxiin* regalia beautifully illustrates these prerogatives.

Aprons with designs created from shaman visions and executed in the weaver's twill-twine techniques are thought to be some of the first objects woven in the *naaxiin* style (see Figure 3.2). Power from the spirit helpers was channeled through the shaman. While dispelling evil spirits and curing the sick, the shaman was aided by the woven image along with spirit songs and sounds. Woven regalia could display messages of intention as they did when they were designed for warfare. The wives of Haida warriors would weave war belts out of whale sinew. Figures of human beings were woven into the belts, which represented the spirit of future war captives (see Figure 3.3) (Swanton 1905a: 55).

The visual language of the arts was intended to extend beyond the comprehension of humans. Its messages were composed also for the natural and supernatural worlds of sky, forest and sea. Travelers and warriors, wearing designs honoring the sky and sea spirits assured safe and victorious canoe expeditions. Donning a woven pattern honoring the forest and sea beings guaranteed a triumphant hunt.

The weavers of the woven regalia held a specialized position within their community. They were transformers, converting raw material: inner red and yellow cedar bark, mountain goat wool, nettle, deer hooves, puffin beaks, martin and sea otter fur into woven objects of communication amid spiritual and natural realms. Mountain goat wool was one of the primary fibers that made up *naaxiin* weavings. Mountain goat spirits were shaman helpers. Hunters inherited or earned the right to pursue the elusive

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mountain goat. In the spring the goat shed its winter coat and privileged gatherers picked the wool from towering mountain paths. Women from villages close to the mountain ranges produced the thin, twisted weft of mountain goat wool: "*Lis*" is the Haida word for this trade item. Cooperative trade was essential for the *naaxiin* weavers of the Pacific Northwest Coast. Northern Tlingit such as the Chilkat had to trade for the cedar that does not flourish in their region. Mountain goats do not reside on the mountains of Haida Gwaii, the Haida needed to trade for the wool. The copper often used for producing the blue dye was a prestigious trade item as well, and coastal weavers had to trade with people that lived further inland for the wolf lichen that is necessary for the rich yellow hue of *naaxiin* regalia.

The warp yarn used for *naaxiin* weaving is composed of thinly shredded yellow cedar bark strips joined together with the mountain goat wool. These two fibers, cedar and wool, are rolled down the thigh into "Z" twisted ply. The inner bark of the yellow cedar adds a stiff core to the warp. This prevents bunching up of the soft goat wool warps when twined with the wefts into circles, U-forms, and ovoids. Only the hands of the weaver work the *naaxiin* woven garment: there is no other tool, no heddle, and no shuttle (Figure 3.4). The warp is hung from a simple gravity-weighted bar loom. It is up to the weaver's fingers to produce the correct tension and placement of warp and weft yarns. The cedar-stiffened wool aides in attaining the proper tension but there may have been another reason that cedar was incorporated into *naaxiin* regalia. In stories set during mythical times, cedar bark woven garments had purifying and restorative powers. Often a legend's hero brought a companion back to life by rubbing him with a

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cedar bark garment. The *naaxiin* mantle with its mystical elements--mountain goat and cedar--was a sacred object of esteem.

The five-sided *naaxiin* chief's robe is wrapped with martin or sea otter fur along its top edge. The sides have an attached doubled plaited braid. This side braid and the shallow "V" shaped bottom edge have an added layer of mountain goat wool fringe. The inner design is surrounded with broad black and yellow borders. Borders within basket designs were intended to keep spiritual elements contained. The wide *naaxiin* borders, woven before the inner pattern, allude to the spirit core of the central design of Killer Whale, Eagle, Wolf, Beaver, Raven or Thunderbird. In the Tsimshian language the robe is called a "*Gwis-halait*." During winter ceremonies of the past, a Tsimshian chief filled his clan's spiritual role of a "*Wi-halait*" (great dancer). In this role he would distribute power to initiates of secret societies. The robe with its bold iconography and swaying fringes must have added greatly to the dramatization of this power transfer.

The Haida had secret societies also and chiefs had the role of initiating novices. Eagle and Raven are the two moieties for the Haida. The two groups fulfilled reciprocal roles during life's milestones such as puberty rites, house erecting, funeral rites, and chief inauguration feasts, as well as secret society initiations. The *naaxiin* robe was an important part of the chief's apparel for his role in the ceremonies conducted for these momentous events.

Winter ceremonies among the Tlingit centered on the veneration of ancestors. Clans own the *naaxiin* robes as part of their ancestral treasures called "*at.ooow*." Handed down from one generation to the next, *at.ooow* are brought out during memorial

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potlatches to display affluence and status. The robes could also be held as individual property. Early photographs show robes attached to grave houses as well as on totem poles, some poles even include carved images of robes (Figure 3.5). Robes displayed in this manner memorialized an individual's honor during his life and identified him in the spirit world.

Wealth, power and social standing was of utmost importance among the Northwest Pacific coast cultures. Hosting feasts and gifting guests established and upheld honor for the clans and chiefs of all the coastal nations. Often a hosting chief would rip a *naaxiin* robe to pieces and distribute the remnants to show his extreme wealth. Distribution of blanket sections was an element in Haida winter ceremonies; these remnants were called "spirit belts" (Figure 3.3). They were handed out as restitution to guests that had been injured by secret society initiates during their spirit dances (Swanton 1905a: 164, 165). Remnants were later pieced into headdresses, dance leggings, purses, dance shirts and aprons. In turn, they too became clan treasures.

The ethnologist John Swanton collected stories from the Haida and Tlingit in the early twentieth century. These were recollections of myth, legends, and clan origin accounts that had been passed from generation to generation by trained oral historians. Through these ancient adventures, knowledge is gained of how apparel was used within a cultural context. In a story collected from Massett, two Haida chiefs clashed over a gambling debt. Due to this debt owed, one insulted the other by using his image in a disrespectful manner. To re-establish his honor the one insulted prepared to show wealth by giving property away. "*Sangaada*" is the Haida word for this face saving

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event. *Tinaah* (copper shields), fish oil, and bentwood treasure boxes were assembled. Songs were composed and practiced. One of the first preparatory activities was the weaving of a crest robe for the chief. In this same story the chief wears an earring: "And Hai'yas had in one ear a long earring made of strung abalone-shell. But on the side where he was going to speak to Lk!ukaslas, he was not going to wear one. And when the chiefs and the chief's sons spoke to him, he was going to turn the side on which he wore the earring towards them" (1908:756-770). This short excerpt contains the intention of one chief to insult the other by not facing him with his earring-adorned side. This story highlights the power of adornment to communicate.

This clan story provides insight into certain designs. For instance, a robe in the Harvard Peabody Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts, has two different designs on each half of the rectangular, woven robe. This robe, named the Swift Robe, made from pure mountain goat wool of white, yellow, and black geometric designs is an early pre-contact chief's robe, pre-dating the *naaxiin* (Figure 3.6). When the robe is draped over the shoulders the designs are divided down the center of the back. Viewed from one side, its design is totally different than when viewed from the other side. The robe's geometric symbolic meanings are lost in history. However the clan story, together with this unique robe, gives us clues into additional purposes for donning a robe of unspoken messages.

Because there are no archaeological remnants of *naaxiin* robes, it is believed to be a relatively recent development, evolving from cedar bark robes and the earlier style geometric patterned robes, now coined "Ravenstail" (see Figure 3.7). By the time the first

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explorers to this coast arrived, the *naaxiin* textiles of cedar and wool were already highly developed. Diaries and journals from these early expeditions clearly described the indigenous apparel. The earliest explorer to Haida Gwaii was Juan Perez aboard the Spanish vessel, *Santiago*. At Langara Island during his trading expedition in 1774, he wrote in his ship's journal the following observation: "All their commerce amounts to giving animal pelts as seals, sea otter and bears... They also have a kind of white wool, which they extract from an unknown species of animal that produces it. They weave beautiful blankets, of which I acquired four. They are not large, but woven and wrought nicely" (Beals 1989:77). Fray Juan Crespi, a chaplain with the same expedition, states in his diary:

All appeared with the body completely covered, some with skins of otter and other animals, others with cloaks woven of wool, or a hair which looked like fine wool, and a garment like a cape and covering them to the waist, the rest of the person being clothed in dressed skins or the woven wool cloths of different colors in handsome patterns. Some of these garments have sleeves others have not (Cutter and Griffin 1969: 192; Wright 2001: 25; DeLaguna: 235).

Artists such as Sigismund Bacstrom, E.F. Burney, Jose Cardero, and John Webber accompanied early explorations and with pen, ink, and pigments produced portraits of the indigenous people of the coast wearing geometric and formline patterned wool and cedar bark clothing (see Figure 3.8).

Unlike the indigenous tribes of the eastern seaboard, contact with European

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customs did not cause an immediate demise of the Northwest Coast First Nation cultures. The primary intention of the early visitors was trade, not domination. The first seventy-five years brought about a flourishing of the indigenous way of life. With the coming of the "Yaatsxaadee--iron men--as the Haida call them, better tools were available. The new tools allowed easier carving of canoes, monumental heraldic and memorial poles. Hunting and trading sea otter pelts brought many new goods to the Northwest cultures. Ceremonial feasts were lavish with abundant and novel objects of wealth. The European mass-produced blankets were adopted as an important trade item with a set value; they became an early currency amongst the different villages of the coastal range. Worn over the shoulders the blanket-turned-robe was embellished for ceremonial wear with sewn appliqué red cloth. It replaced cedar capes and robes that were painted in the past with red ochre crest designs. The new blanket robes were further adorned with dentalia shells, mother of pearl buttons, and abalone shell pieces. The use of the blue-green color and the blue abalone shells were the prerogative of nobility. This may explain why blue, not red, is a standard color within designs of *naaxiin* chief regalia.

First Nation people assimilated the new material and ideas into their cultures. These changes were reflected in the art of the coast. Human figures with jackets and top hats carved in cedar posts spoke of adventures in cities such as Victoria and Seattle. Egyptian sphinx and circus elephants were carved motifs adopted from book illustrations and newspapers (Wright 2001: 170-171, 204, 277, 290). Sailing ships carved in argillite stone told of meeting with traders. Imported sheet copper replaced native

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copper in the prestigious *tinaah*. Cotton twine replaced animal sinew for cording. Blue military jackets were soaked to bleed the new blue color for dyeing the *naaxiin* weaving wefts. Commercial knitting yarns eventually replaced the *naaxiin* mountain goat weft fibers.

With the coming of settlers and missionaries a vastly different worldview was introduced to the coast nations. European diseases devastated the population of all the villages of the Pacific Northwest. Shamans were ineffectual against the new sicknesses. First Nation people were encouraged to adopt the monotheistic Christian religion. Winter ceremonies did not retain the spiritual rituals of the past. European-style cottages replaced large clan houses. Gone was the stage on which the *naaxiin* robe danced its message of spirit and prestige. Wealth was defined differently by the newcomers' economic system. Trade and barter was replaced with job wages and monetary gain. Creating art for curio collectors engaged the traditional skills of carving, painting, and weaving. Weavers made miniature versions of the large utilitarian clam, seaweed, and storage baskets for the growing tourist trade. Men carved miniature totem poles and canoes. It was the Northern Chilkat Tlingit that continued to weave the full size *naaxiin* robe for this latest audience. The Chilkat Tlingit women continued weaving the *naaxiin* into the early 1900's, and because of this these robes are currently called "Chilkat."

As fluid and flexible as the defining formline, the Pacific Northwest Coast art continues into this age of dynamic change. Artists span the realms of the mystical past to the innovations of the future to produce art that speaks of the present. For the

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Northwest textiles weavers there has been a recent renaissance. Due to researchers such as Cheryl Samuel and Bill Holm, forgotten techniques are rediscovered. Weavers are again producing the once-extinct Ravenstail regalia (Figure 3.7 and 3.9). Traditional weavers such as Jenny Thlunaut and Delores Churchill as well as Cheryl Samuel have mentored a new generation of textile weavers. This revival has caused some weavers to go further and learn the complex iconography and techniques of the *naaxiin* textiles as well. Unlike the Ravenstail, the art of weaving the *naaxiin* has never been broken, but due to the complex designing, *naaxiin* robes demand more than a year to execute and only a handful of contemporary weavers have taken the challenge to complete a full robe (Figure 3.10). The Ravenstail and *naaxiin* robes continue to be rare and prestigious garments worn by leaders and traditional chiefs.

Teaching and passing on the techniques is a very important goal for present day *naaxiin* weavers. Through workshops, classes and mentoring programs young weavers are practicing the art. Challenged by the standards set by our ancestors we take up the threads of traditional skills to weave with fresh new ideas. Designs are inspired by ancient clan crests as well as by contemporary stories from our interactions with the constantly changing world of today. Ancient techniques are followed but due to using new materials such as the commercial "S"-twisted plied wefts some weavers have started to "S" twine those wefts to maintain the look of ancient patterns. Others choose to keep with the ancestors "Z"-twining hand movements. All *naaxiin* woven objects of the past were worked with the "Z"-twisted weft and twining. The contemporary weavers have many choices with new colors, materials, design, and object forms all

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creatively produced to tell of our present day evolving traditions.

Once again regalia such as leggings, headdresses, pouches, tunics, and dance aprons are being used in the vibrant present day performance arts of First Nation's song and dance. The *naaxiin* robe with its fluent crest art continues to speak of the everlasting spirit of the people and cultures of the Pacific Northwest Coast.

Illustrations:



Figure 3.1, Diving whale design robe, Tlingit, 19th century, cedar bark, mountain goat wool, 63.4 x 53.2 inches, Walter Waters Collection, Burke Museum #1-1587.



Figure 3.2, William White (Tsimshian), *All My Ancestors Are Raven* apron, 2000, wool, cedar bark, 21.3 x 33.1 inches, gift of Arthur B. Steinman, Burke Museum #2004-2/103, gift of Arthur Steinman.

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Figure 3.3, Evelyn Vanderhoop (Haida), *Spirit Belt*, 2008-2009, mountain goat wool, cedar bark, leather, beaver fur, deer hooves, beads, 15 x 27 inches, gift of Evelyn Vanderhoop, Burke Museum Cat. No. 2009-183/1.



Figure 3.4, Evelyn Vanderhoop weaving, 2000, photo by Helen Carlson.



Figure 3.5, John Wallace (Haida), *Master Carpenter pole*, Mud Bight Park, Ketchikan, 1941, photograph by Adelaide de Menil, Burke Museum #2008-18/275.

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Figure 3.6, *Swift Robe* (Tlingit), mountain goat wool, photo by Hillel Burger, Peabody Harvard #09-8-10/76401.



Figure 3.7, Marie Oldfield (Tsimshian), *Raven's Tail Robe*, 2002, Marino wool, sea otter fur, 52 x 74 inches, gift of Arthur B. Steinman, Burke Museum #2004-2/417.



Figure 3.8, Sigismund Bacstrom, *Tchua a Chief of Queen Charlotte's Island in Lat. 52, 12N*, 1793, watercolor, 10.7 x 7.4 inches, courtesy of Paul Mellon Collection, Yale Collection of Western Americana, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

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Figure 3.9, John Beard (S'klallam) with Dawn DiGregorio, Dodie Gannett, Carol Griesmeyer, Eileen Jacobs, Alene Linehan, Fran Mazzara, Darlene Peters, Paula Sauvageau, Delores Schnitzer, Betty Swinkel, Shelly Tarbet, *Damascus Three Panel Robe*, 1998, merino wool, fur, leather, 61 x 66 inches, gift of Damascus Ravenstail Weavers, Burke Museum #2005-124/1.



Figure 3.9, Evelyn Vanderhoop (Haida), *Naaxiin Robe*, merino wool, yellow cedar bark, sea otter fur, 2002-2003, collection of Gayle and Charlie Pancerzewski, photograph by Jerry McCollum.